Kakashi leaves ANBU on Hokage's orders only to find himself staring at the disaster of a team he is given. But sometimes one question is enough to change everything. For better or worse? Only time will show.
When I began writing this story, I haven't planned it to be more than 10k words and four or five chapters of gratuitous smut and oc adventures. Well, what a dreamer I was! Sakura took over almost immediately, because I love her dearly and what Kishimoto did to her breaks my heart.

Anyway! I'm a sucker for teamwork, fuuinjutsu and murderous ladies, so if you love those too, give this story a chance!

Much love, Kay

P.S. It was brought to my attention that Anko isn't actually in ANBU. Oopsie. I dug through my bookmarks and found it was actually BC_Brynn who wrote Anko this way and I kind of fell in love with the series Trust Your Nose so hard, it never occurred to me Anko isn't ANBU and/or Dove. Fanon was great and it won. So Anko being Dove is not my idea and please go check Trust Your Nose out, it's an amazing series totally worth your read!

See the end of the work for more notes.
“And what is your goal, Sakura?”

Yeah, what is your goal, Inner muttered in the back of her mind. Enlighten them. Aren't you tired of being a useless fangirl? Is that what you really want? What we want?~

Sakura opened her mouth to give some generic bullshit answer and, after a brief moment of hesitation, snapped it shut. Of course Inner was right. She never wanted to become that, but sometimes a person had to do things they despise if they planned to live long enough to learn to protect themselves. And Sakura didn’t want to simply survive in the harsh shinobi world of half-truths and menacing shadows, she wanted to strive. If it meant she had to split herself in half and act like a crazy fangirl? She’d kind of done that already, so there was no point in looking back.

The only thing that bothered her was what she had to do now. Inner - their strength and fiery temper, their braver part - wanted to take what was rightfully theirs: she wanted to tear the wall down and see the light again. Sakura - their self-control and cunning, cautious part - was wary.

They’d been assigned to a team that was doomed from the very beginning, it seemed. The team was meant to be a shinobi's strength, a pillar of survival, closer than family. And team couldn't exist without trust. But could she trust two hotheads with a bad case of tunnel vision with her dream?

Sakura honestly didn't like Naruto's constant nagging and bragging. And the ability to make a shitstorm out of nothing~ , Inner added snidely, shaking her imaginary fist in the air. They both felt more than a little contempt for loudmouthed blonde, but at the same time they could understand.

With his hands off upbringing and need to prove his existence, the boy did his best to draw attention to himself the only possible way he knew - by making a mess.

Sasuke on the other hand? He was a mess. It was written all over him in big red letters.

Screwed up in the head~ , Inner supplied readily, making Sakura wonder how they managed to pull the whole 'in love with Sasuke-kun’ act for so long.

He’d been moody to the point of creepy the last couple of years, not that she could blame him with his whole family… Well, it made it easier to understand his one-track mind being firmly trained on becoming an avenger. But Sakura had grown so used to acting like a useless girl with her head in the
clouds, she wasn't sure how to react without putting herself at risk of being discovered.

But she wasn’t in the Academy anymore, the weight of forehead protector a constant reminder of that. She had become a shinobi because she had a dream and, even if her team wasn’t anywhere close to ideal as Ino’s or even Hinata’s, well… She would just have to make it work. Somehow. With a lot of pushing and pulling on her part.

Sakura's only hope was their sensei and she was already having a hard time believing he was half as good as rumors said. At least he looks dangerous, she mused and winced from Inner's shriek of horror. To be two parts of the same person, they really didn’t have anything in common, did they?

“Earth to Sakura-chan!” Naruto waved his hand in front of her thoughtful face, but she swatted it away before he could actually touch her.

“Shut up, Naruto. I'm thinking!” She snapped, more out of habit than real anger and looked up at her teacher.

Kakashi-sensei looked… tired? There was an air of uncertainty around him and stiffness in his motions, hidden by the mask and fake relaxed posture. He was rumored to be a genius and a monster on the battlefield and friend killer, but the uncomfortable blinking of his left eye gave away his nervousness. Something didn't add up.

He didn't look like someone who had volunteered to become a jōnin sensei. Instead, he seemed like a man who had walked into a trap knowing it is a trap, but having no other option. Like someone had ordered him to take the team.

No wonder, Inner for once kept her tone neutral, thoughtful. Unstable Uchiha and uneducated Uzumaki, who else would Hokage have to look after them if not a famous Copy Nin?~

Sakura mentally shrugged in agreement, wondering what on earth had gotten into Hokage-sama to put her on the same team as these two. She might have been top second kunoichi in their class, but that didn't make her a miracle worker or a powerhouse. Ino had surpassed her in taijutsu and flower arrangement, but not even she would have been able to keep up with these two.

As if anyone could beat a Yamanaka when it came to flowers~

No one could, Sakura conceded.

Still, all her achievements seemed lackluster when compared with Sasuke’s genius and Naruto might have been dead last, but this dead last had a Great Spirit bound to him even if he didn’t know it yet. And if her calculations were right and he was the son of the Fourth Hokage and Uzumaki-sama? Well, Sakura hoped so. Maybe then, some of their genius and innate talents would carry over to Naruto. Maybe his potential had just been hidden under abundance of energy.

Inner snorted as Naruto flailed at Sasuke about ramen. So much for hoping ~

We’re just a ‘third’, Sakura sighed in the end. No kekkei genkai, no clan techniques, nothing impressive. Personality wasn’t important, her abilities standard and unassuming. The administration just needed someone to complete the team. It stung a little, to be so thoroughly disregarded, but she had come to expect that and had learned to take this assessment at its face value long ago. No one believed she could do well which meant she had succeeded. She had become invisible.

A small smile crept up her lips. It felt good to be in control for once, even if the only thing she controlled was her answer. To stay in the shadows or move forward on into the spotlight, to watch everybody's backs or show them who she really was. She and Inner had spent years hoping for this
moment.

When Sakura finally looked up, she met with Kakashi-sensei’s inquisitive grey eye. Her dialogue with Inner hadn’t lasted more than a minute, but of course he noticed. *Turns out he's good for something~*, Inner laughed nervously, coming up closer to the surface of their shared mindscape.

*Aren’t we ready to change? ~* 

Familiarity and strength, awareness and cunning came together, giving Sakura an unexpected clarity of thought.

Carefully, gently, her fingers formed a modified snake seal like Ino had taught her to and the separation between them shrunk as both parts gravitated towards each other, not yet reconnected, but more in sync than before.

*We are.*

It was unsafe to undo Two Minds One Heart technique completely at first. But she felt good, ecstatic even, to be one step closer to being whole again. Maybe with time and with the help of her team...

Sakura held on that tendril of hope as the backlash hit her, molding her personality into a new, more balanced one. A lot was lost, taken away forever by *that day*, but she had survived and now she was ready to finally live.

*We really are.*

Sakura threaded her trembling fingers, shaking from the sudden influx of chakra to her system, through her long pink hair, pushing the strands away from her face, and gave her jōnin sensei a sharp grin.

“My goal?” There was no hesitation in her voice anymore. “I want to master one of Four Greater Seals.”
“You want to become a sealmaster, huh? Why, if you don't mind me asking?” Her jōnin sensei’s only visible grey brow shot up in surprise. He didn’t sound condescending, though, or outright laugh at the idea and Sakura felt her lips twitch slightly. It was a start.

“Because that’s what my aunt is,” she shrugged. “She protects the village and I want to do the same.”

“What’s a sealmaster?!” Naruto squawked, drowning out Kakashi-sensei’s reply. The boy’s face was scrunched in a suspicious grimace and Sakura could barely hold back her laughter at the sight of it. “Is it powerful?” he went on, looking back and forth between her and sensei.

“It’s a person, idiot. One who uses seals to make traps and bombs.” Sasuke didn’t really roll his eyes but it was a close thing. Then he turned to Sakura. For the first time since morning~, Inner spat, showing him her invisible middle finger.

Sakura willed down an eyeroll of her own. Pretentious asshole.

“You’ve always said you’re from a civilian family,” Uchiha noted in a voice as dry as a Wind Country desert, watching her with his dark unreadable eyes.

“Like you’ve ever listened to what I say,” she shot back, shaking off the remnants of her self-induced infatuation. With Inner closer to the surface, the emotions she usually kept in check were much harder to control and some of it slipped from her grasp.

Sakura knew she was acting erratically, but she was also sure she’d be able to get it under control with time. So she centered herself the best she could and continued in a much more reserved tone, “And my parents aren’t ninja, so~”

Before she had a chance to finish, Sasuke crossed his pale, bony arms in front of his chest and turned away muttering something, probably to show he had lost all interest in their conversation. Pity, Sakura heard what he said and didn’t like it very much.

She felt Inner rise up like an angry tornado and grabbed him by the collar, hissing right in his ear,
“What did you just say about my aunt?”

Sasuke blinked owlishly and made an attempt to squirm away from her iron grip. A satisfyingly unsuccessful attempt.

“Nothing?” he tried, shocked by the sudden change in her attitude and gasping for air, his arms flapping around uselessly. Sakura didn’t budge.

“Come again?” There was something terrifying in her bared-toothed smile, feral and unpredictable. Like she was one step from clawing his eyes out.

“I said she’s probably not that strong.” he practically wheezed. “What's in sitting at home and drawing seals, everyone can do it. Use… argh, useless.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Sakura saw Kakashi-sensei glaring her down with warning clear in his eye so she relaxed her hold a bit, letting Sasuke come up for air even though the only thing Inner wanted her to do was to *pummel this power hungry idiot into the nearest wall ~*

“Would you say the Fourth Hokage was weak then?” She jerked her head at the partly obscured Hokage monument, not even bothering to hide her incredulity. “And he wasn't even a full fledged sealmaster!”

Sakura watched Sasuke's eyes widen and kept pressing on, hoping to break through that thick skull of his. “His wife, Uzumaki-sama, was a true sealmaster born in Uzushiogakure,” she said seriously. “She had one of the Four Greater Seals, Gold. And when my aunt fought in the Third War, she mastered one too! She’s spent years protecting Konoha and she's. Not. Useless.”

Sakura stressed her last words by shaking Sasuke a little before letting him go. Only then did she notice the way Naruto was staring at her. Like she had given him a yearly amount of candy, or in his case, ramen (he liked ramen, didn’t he?) and then just set it all on fire.

“Uzumaki?” he asked, worry and wonder mixed in his blue eyes. “There was an Uzumaki in Konoha stronger than Fourth?”

*Of course that's all he took away from that little speech!~* Sakura just sighed, wincing at another shriek from Inner. *Tunnel vision, keep calm, carry on…*

“Of course she was, how else would she control the Kyū-”

“Sakura, I don't think it's the right place or time to discuss these matters.” There was an aura of finality about Kakashi-sensei as he cut her short. He glared at her sternly and she nodded jerkily, her mouth snapping shut. He was her sensei and there was no way Sakura was going to be anything but respectful to her superiors. She never made same mistakes twice.

But his reaction got her thinking. What had Aunt's journal said about Great Spirits?

*People are so afraid of greater beings... There's no worse curse in all elemental countries than 'tailed beast devour your soul’ even though spirits rarely prefer souls over flesh and bone. Kurama-sama is certainly too picky to eat any random soul. It has to be someone really twisted to get to him. He'd rather sleep all the time and go on at length about some deep philosophical concept Kushina-shishō hates so much. They're a match made in heaven.*

*The village people have no idea. They think the Kyūbi no Kitsune is a mindless beast, but he's smarter than most of them. I bet he's smarter than Hokage-sama, older too*
though they're both ancient. Maybe that's why he's so moody all the time.

But civilians will do what they always do: bid a grand fuck you to logic and hate and scorn Great Spirits and their partners, too. They call them 'vessels', denying their humanity, robbing them of rights and choices and then shinobi go even further by using them in their pointless wars.

I hope this war ends soon or they can summon shishō. They already put me on the ANBU roster so I have to complete 'Rust' as soon as possible. Better me than her and Kurama-sama.

That entry was the second to last in aunt Rensa's diary and left more questions than answers, but it at least explained why people treated Naruto like dirt under their feet. How could anyone be so disrespectful? Sakura was honestly put off by the stupidity of the whole situation.

But then again Uzumaki-sama seemed to be a great person and a strong, admirable shinobi from the scraps of letters aunt Rensa left, and still there was no word about her in the history class apart from the fact she'd let the 'beast' loose. And that the Fourth Hokage gave his life to save Konoha after she couldn't get it under control.

Sakura didn't want to believe that had been the case. The story had sounded like typical politicized crap even before aunt's journals because Sakura's mom knew Uzumaki-sama. There was even a photograph of them together in their family album.

She'd never spoken about the Kyūbi's attack on Konoha, though, and she had forbidden Sakura to have any interaction with Naruto as soon as the girl was old enough to understand complex phrases. One thing she didn’t manage to do was hide the sadness in her eyes when Sakura dutifully told her about the boy's pranks and scruffy looks among other school gossip.

The whispers when people thought no one was looking were hard to miss too. And Sakura, weak, girly, unimportant Sakura was easily ignored. She didn't have a full picture yet, but she had an idea about all this jinchūriki business and it wasn't pretty. Horrifying, really, and mentally trying and cruel to the person most involved.

Sakura didn't like Naruto because he was too bright, too loud and desperate to be noticed and was unsafe to befriend (she tried once and that day was still too fresh in her memory and most likely would never fade), but she didn't hate him. For the most part she felt sorry for him in a way very few people did.

They were a team now anyway, so maybe that 'don't-you-dare-be-kind’ ban was lifted somewhat. Sakura hoped it was because she needed to trust her team and for that they had to have an actual relationship.

Not for the first time in past six years since mom had given her the journals Sakura wondered if aunt Rensa even knew about Naruto. All things considered, she probably didn't or she would have delayed her mission to at least meet him, if not refused it completely to take care of her... well, whatever Naruto was to her aunt, Sakura didn't believe the woman would leave him completely alone willingly.

She cursed inwardly, mildly aware of how it all looked. Like a pile of ninken shit~. Inner supplied readily, knowing well about the darker parts of living in a shinobi village, being the result of Sakura living in a shinobi village and being too friendly at the sweet age of seven.

If only she had a way to contact aunt Rensa and ask her... but there was no such way.
Sakura wasn't stupid. If Kakashi-sensei, who'd been the Fourth's student for some time and probably knew Uzumaki-sama too, didn't step in in any way, he either had no heart or there were politics involved. Again.

And Sakura really didn't want to find out what new ways of mind torture T&I had come up since her unfortunate meeting with one of its member five years ago. She needed to tread very carefully here.

“But why, Kaka-sensei?” Naruto kept pestering their long suffering teacher. “No one ever talks to me about other Uzumaki! They banned me from history class in the Academy and when I tried to find something, anything, the old hag from the library wouldn’t even let me in! Why can’t Sakura-chan tell me if she knows?”

“You didn't just skip those lessons, huh?” Sakura and Sasuke asked in unison, bewilderment clear in their voices. “The Academy banned you?”

Even though Sakura was nearly one hundred percent certain she knew the reason Naruto had been banned, had rationalized it and moved on (for now), Inner was still fuming. Sasuke was standing at her left with his hands gripping the hem of his shirt so tightly, the fabric began to fray. His eyes flickered from the blonde boy to the Hokage monument once, twice. Then, in a strained voice he asked, “Hey, Naruto? Isn't your birthday on October 10th?”

“It is,” Sakura answered when Naruto ignored them both in favor of keeping Kakashi-sensei away from his book. Judging by how disheveled the man looked, he was both thoroughly exhausted and on the verge of using shunshin to get away from Naruto's shrill voice.

“Does it mean that he…”

“Yeah,” Sakura nodded to the unfinished question. Whatever Sasuke meant to ask, the answer would probably be yes. They looked at each other and then at a still whining Naruto, completely oblivious to their silent exchange.

“But how could they?” It seemed the realisation was slowly dawning on Sasuke, turning his shock into anger. Rightfully so!~

It probably was the first time they were in agreement, Sakura thought and tiredly hid her face in her hands. The situation was spiralling out of control. Naruto was asking questions that were apparently forbidden, Sasuke looked like he had been struck by lightning, her jōnin sensei seemed completely at a loss, but she couldn't shake the feeling that this disaster of a first team meeting was the beginning of a beautiful relationship.

Maybe she wasn't as right in the head as the psych eval committee came to believe. She probably wasn't at all.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: First of all, A HUGE THANK YOU to everyone who left feedback on this story, it really kept me going through this hell of a week! Some of the comments raised valid points I felt the need to address in this chapter as well as chapters five and eight.
A/N 2: Also, please bear in mind that, while it may seem that I'm playing with the canon
from the Team Seven's first meeting, it's actually more complicated and, I dare say, deeper than that. Orochimaru-haters beware, Danzo-haters, jump on board :D
A/N 3: And lastly, the chapters are really short for now and there might seem to be little action going on there but as the tags say, the story's gonna be 'dialogue heavy' for future five or six chapters ;) It's the first time I try to write more talking than usual and so far I enjoy it immensely. This story has no beta, so all mistakes are mine (don't hesitate to point them out) and language barrier's :D
As usual, much love, Kay <3

In the next chapter we'll see how Kakashi reacts to the kids not being what he had expected. Maybe ANBU wasn't that bad after all.
Kakashi would always remember the moment his gentle, ever present but in retrospect absolutely tiny headache turned into the worst migraine he had ever experienced. This day would haunt him for years.

He should have ran the moment Hokage said the word 'genin'.

He was so fucked.

If someone had told him the girl was about to become his biggest problem, Kakashi would have probably found it hilarious. What problem could a fangirl pose? She was meant to be the weakest part of the team, the first to be thrown away. But right now Kakashi was at a complete loss.

Sakura had proved his initial assessment right when he met three kids in their classroom. Fawning over Sasuke, smacking Naruto upside his head for simply talking to her - it all was her normal behavior, nothing outside of Umino-san's reports. Kakashi had already gathered his resolve to stoically deal with the girl's immature escapades, not that she was the worst of the three.

It all went according to plan at first. Naruto was bubbly and energetic, going on tirelessly about ramen and becoming the Hokage. Sasuke was stiff and disinterested as usual, concentrated solely on that avenger business of his. Young, traumatized and unable to see the bigger picture. Or unwilling. Sakura was supposed to be just a civilian girl, nothing of interest. Or he thought so up until the very moment he asked the young kunoichi about her dream - that's when their introductions took an unusual turn.

Kakashi saw her eyes grow distant like she was speaking to someone. Slowly her fingers met on her lap to form a crooked snake handseal and then her body language suddenly changed. She sat straighter, smiled sharper, nearly baring her teeth at him in a clear challenge. There was steel in her voice when she finally spoke her mind and that made no sense. She made no sense.

The girl had more layers than Kakashi first thought and the ANBU trained part of him screamed to dive in and question her, to get to the truth. But at the same time he had a catastrophe to prevent because if someone heard them discussing Naruto's heritage, a painful and forbidden topic, they were
Hatake Kakashi already had enough people to mourn. Naruto they wouldn’t touch and Sasuke was their hope for a new copy ninja. The girl, however, was expendable. *But smart enough to fool Academy instructors apparently*, he couldn't but notice.

With a weary sigh Kakashi shook his head as Naruto’s questions grew in number and loudness for the last five minutes. The blonde boy was so focused on getting his answers, he completely missed his teammates’ worried and nearly wordless exchange.

It was actually another surprise: once properly shaken and just slightly strangled, Sasuke ceased his hostility towards no-more-moon-eyed Sakura and was now standing by her side with an expression of shock with a side of anger and grief. Or maybe Kakashi was seeing things. It seemed with these three anything was possible.

Still, they were communicating in a non-death-promising way, cooperating even, Kakashi dared hope. It was a mixed blessing, but in his twenty six years, he’d learned that beggars can't be choosers. It was probably time to intervene. And since the pink angel turned out to be a nosy menace, he'd use her as a buffer.

*She started this, she'll be the one to do most of the talking.* And they had a lot to discuss since Naruto's family matters were brought to his attention. He tried so hard to think about it in a non-ANBU capacity, but the bridge in the open on the outskirts of Konoha wasn't the place for these discussions.

“You three, follow me,” Kakashi ordered and took off in the direction of the city center, leaving the kids behind. If he was letting them enter his home, no way he'd make the way there easy. Just out of spite.

“Wait, what?” Naruto cried at his already disappearing silhouette.

“Come on, get going, dead last,” Sasuke snapped and sprinted past confused boy at the top of his speed.

“Don't you dead last me, idiot!”

“Oh, for gods' sake!” Sakura grabbed Naruto by the dirty collar of his battered orange jacket and hurried after their teammate, the blonde dragging behind her like a sack of rice. “Make sure you don't lose his trace!” she shouted at Sasuke's back.

Kakashi was jumping languidly from roof to roof, smirking under his mask at the chaos that followed him down the streets of Konoha. Enraged cries of civilians and the thumping of three pairs of feet were the best indication of his team's success in this wild chase. And successful they were. *For now.*

People were scuttling away instinctively from the disheveled Uchiha boy who was leading the pursuit. He wasn't half bad at this, truth be told, and didn't let Kakashi out of this sight. Every time the jōnin changed directions or sped up, Sasuke growled not unlike Shiba, making the man laugh mirthfully. It was starting to get interesting.

At first Kakashi planned to simply take the kids to his place, maybe make them sweat a little on the way here, but then the idea struck him: he could test them now. Of course the bell test was something of a tradition passed down to him by Minato-sensei, but the time just wasn't right. He needed the trio, Naruto especially, to keep their mouths shut about some things and an exercise in teamwork could
help him with that, because keeping a low profile to save the team was much better motivation than doing it simply because their sensei said so.

Kakashi hoped it would work.

Without any warning he took a sharp turn towards the market district and used shunshin to land on the tree branch two blocks away from where Sasuke was spinning in one place wildly. It would probably take them some time to figure his location, so the man pulled his precious orange book out of the pocket and settled for at least an hour of silence and easy flow of familiar story.

“I lost him,” Sasuke ground out when Naruto and Sakura finally caught up with him. “The bastard used shunshin!”

“Well…” Sakura crouched at the entrance to the dark alleyway, breathless and sweaty. “Oof, we need… to find him. Have to spread out and sweep the area.”

Running wore her out and for the last thirty minutes of their chase, she had been taking up the rear of their small group until Naruto slowed down a bit to check on her. He looked like they hadn't just crossed half of Konoha but took a walk in the park, damn his stamina! Even Inner couldn't argue, staying back with her was gentlemanly of him, especially since Sasuke was too busy tailing sensei to see her stumble and nearly fall a couple of times. Okay, more than a couple.

“Are you okay, Sakura-chan?”

She looked up and met Naruto's blue eyes with a tired smile.

“Yeah, just winded. Thanks,” she grunted, but not unkindly. It was becoming increasingly harder to filter her emotions and keep anger at bay since she started to undo the technique Ino had taught her. But Naruto could use some positive feedback if she wanted them all to become a functional team one day. Oh, you're a dreamer~, Inner rolled her eyes out of habit.

“Hn.” Sasuke was eloquent as always. He measured his teammates with a glare that wasn't nearly as cold as it had been in the morning (but still nowhere near friendly) and nodded at the alleyway. “I'll take backstreets. Haruno, check the main street. Dobe, you can climb like a monkey, go look for him from above.”

It was a sound plan, so Sakura hummed in agreement and willed her body back up. Stretching, she mentally prepared for another round of running, pushing the pain of strained muscles to the back of her mind. Let Inner deal with it, she had a sensei to find.

“Wait, wait, wait!” Naruto caught both her and Sasuke by their elbows before they could leave in their designated directions and smiled wildly. “Let Sakura-chan take some rest, teme, I can do it!” Before she or Sasuke could comment on that improbable statement, the blonde brought his hands up to form a seal.

The last thing Sakura saw before everything went white was Naruto's proud grin.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Phew, what's a better way to start a new week if not a new chapter? Only the
whole story just magically transferring from my imagination straight into the google doc
I'm abusing with my cross-device writing ahaha :D But that's not going to happen, so I
concentrated and - tada! - here’s another chapter!
And here we have Kakashi’s first impression of the kids. He doesn't feel blessed right
now, I'm sure :D
A/N 2: You folks asked in reviews (and those are making me a happy squealing mess,
thanks to everyone who left feedback!) about the Four Seals stuff. In due time it will be
explained, for now our pups really have no time to talk about those. But soon! I
promise!
A/N 3: Once again, thank you for all the nice words you leave in comments section! As
you can see, they have this magical effect of me writing next chapters at any moment
available (even right now when I probably have to sleep:D).
Love ya all, Kay <3
Coming next: Did I tell you the kids are fucked up? Well, I do now.
The street disappeared in a thick cloud of smoke and the sudden rush of chakra made Sakura gasp. There were Naruto's clones everywhere, jumping in front of her, climbing the dango shop on their left, waving at them from the roof of the bookstore. “Wow,” she whispered, trying to count orange jackets that flooded her vision and giving up at twenty third. There were so many of them...

“How did you do it?” She asked incredulously, poking one of the clones. By all rules it should have dissipated, but clone-Naruto squeaked instead and jumped away, rubbing his clavicle.

“I…” The original Naruto opened his mouth to answer, but stopped mid-sentence. “I found Kakashi-sensei,” he said abruptly and then let out an enraged cry, “He's reading a book!”

Clone crowd broke out into a loud chatter, their hands flapping around wildly as they pushed each other, babbling about the ways to prank Kakashi-sensei for running from them to read. Naruto really was that clueless, wasn't he?

Sakura felt the inklings of a plan come together in her head thanks to Inner's tireless efforts to make everybody's lives harder yet better at the same time. She knew they couldn't take a jōnin, especially this one, by surprise, but she still wanted him to see they weren't just a bunch of Academy misfits.

Ah, only Naruto is an Academy misfit~, Inner muttered, mentally flexing her hands, ready to strangle the boy for all the noise his copies were producing (Sakura really needed to find an outlet for Inner's pent up aggression before someone got hurt). And, judging by the sheer number of clones littering the street, Naruto wasn't as simple as she had thought before, Great Spirit business notwithstanding.

Sakura turned to Sasuke and choked on her words. He stood with his back firmly pressed to the wall of the bookstore, eyes squeezed shut and hands trembling. The boy was even paler than normal, almost green and probably nauseous. Sakura noticed his breath hitch when one of Naruto's clones was pushed, bumping into the crumbling yellow paint beside him, and with a stifled, panicked 'no, please don't' Sasuke slid down the wall, hugging his knees.

Things were getting increasingly out of hand.

“Naruto, decrease your numbers, will you?” Sakura asked in a hushed tone, not knowing what could trigger Sasuke to spiral further into the panic attack. She slowly knelt in front of him, wincing as a sharp piece of gravel dug into her unprotected skin, and whispered at dumbfounded blonde, “Deactivate your jutsu, goddamnit, leave one or two to watch Kakashi-sensei, but get them out of here!”

“Oh, okay?” The boy did a handseal and the clones dissolved with loud pops, leaving behind only small puffs of smoke. Then he crouched at Sakura's right. “What's wrong with him? Is he…”
“Probably having a panic attack,” the girl winced, her mind whirring with possible courses of action and finding none. She wasn’t in any way proficient to deal with psychological trauma except for bottling it up, which sucked greatly.

“This never happened in the Academy,” Naruto muttered, suddenly completely serious, “but then he’s never really been close enough to anyone to notice. Not since that day.”

There was gravity in his voice that made Sakura look up. The boy’s face lost all joviality he’d always been carrying around like a shield and was now a blank mask. “It's not my chakra surge,” he reasoned, “there were lots at Academy. Too many eyes, someone would have noticed if he freaked out. But it must be something we've done…”

“No we,” Sakura perked up, getting where his train of thought was going, “the clones! They were so loud and pushy even I felt a little claustrophobic.”

They fell into uneasy silence, unsure how to help their struggling teammate. He was still curling over his knees, breathing heavily and shaking.

“tettebayo, if it was me, you guys could talk me out of it,” Naruto hissed after a few moments. “But he’s different. We could make it worse.”

He was right, Sakura knew, but seeing the boy she spent years pretending to be sickeningly in love with in such a bad state pushed her to take action. They could use Naruto's clone to call sensei, but again, who knew how Sasuke would react to another shinobi. It left them with only one option.

“Sasuke, do you hear me?” she asked gently, placing her hands palms up on her knees to show she was not a threat. “It's Sakura and Naruto, remember? We want to help you. Let us help you. Please.”

He jerked his head up and Sakura nearly fell back, startled by his movement, but Naruto’s warm hand on her shoulder steadied her. Nervously they watched as some recognition slipped into Sasuke's dark empty eyes.

“Where?” he rasped, blinking at the two.

“We’re still in the alley, teme,” Naruto answered easily while Sakura was at a loss for words. “The clones are gone.”

She remembered what it felt like to come back to yourself at a random street after a particularly bad fright. The first couple of weeks after her fateful meeting with that certain T&I chūnin had been rough. But she wasn't going to start a competition on who was more f***ed in the head.

Sasuke dropped his head low, hiding from his teammates behind the veil of black hair. The trembling finally started to slow, but his skin was still clammy and not in a healthy way. It was no lie in saying that Sasuke looked like a wreck. Good thing they were in the alleyway before all the hell broke loose and the busy life of Konoha's early dinner rush drifted by without anyone noticing three genin crouching at the back of the bookstore.

“Hey, teme.” Naruto smiled a bit in a new, crooked way Sakura hadn’t seen before, and knelt beside her with his arms open. “I know this sucks and I don't know what you're going through but it must be bad. You can talk shit about me all you want, hell, you can even punch me if you need to. I've had worse, believe it. But listen to what I say and maybe think about it. You're not alone.”

Sasuke's eyes glinted through the dark curtain of his hair as he turned to watch the blonde. Sakura could understand his surprise. She never would have thought that Naruto could be the subtle type and he wasn't, not really, but his honesty turned out to be their best shot.
There was a hiss like someone let the air out of a balloon. Sakura's eyes searched the entrance into the alley but people were still passing by, ignoring their not-quite-hideaway completely. She turned back, belatedly realizing that it was Sasuke laughing - a pained, drained of life hollow sound.

Sasuke knew that anyone teamed up with him would essentially be a dead man walking and had done his best to push people away from the first day he got back to the Academy. Not getting attached became his mantra, the words he woke up to and went to sleep with. It was only a question of time before that man came back and took away anything Sasuke truly cared for.

There was so much to be afraid of, he actually forgot how not to be scared. He just learned not to show it. When the female population of his class for some reason chose Sasuke as their idol, he was annoyed by their noisiness, but didn’t exactly try to stop them. They were convenient, because people stared at them, not at him.

But it didn't get better with time as adults said it would and he still had nightmares most nights, even four years after everything… happened. Ended. He still heard the voices (laughing, singing, happy, pained, screaming, mocking, no!) every time he closed his eyes trying to fall asleep. He knew they hated him for staying alive.

The stain on the floorboards of the living room didn't wash away completely. Sasuke avoided the place for five months, but one day, after a third sleepless night in a row, he went to the store and bought a can of wood polish. Scrubbing at it mercilessly, he then painted a layer after layer, nightmare after nightmare… but the stain at the place where his parents had been killed just got darker with every year.

Sasuke had started coming to terms with his impending insanity long ago. The team was only meant to quicken the process. Only… Sakura turned out to be not so out of touch with reality and maybe not so useless as he had believed her to be and Naruto was-

Sasuke shook his head, trying to think straight. The dead last apparently was a Hokage’s son, had a demon sealed in him and could make at least forty copies of himself which was a formidable feat on its own. Could it be he wasn't that stupid? Was he strong enough? Could he and Sakura survive being close to him?

No. And it grated at his insides and twisted and pulled so much that he wanted to curl in a ball and disappear. He had no right to hope.

Sasuke hated Naruto's sincerity. Sasuke despised the understanding in Sakura's eyes. Sasuke loathed the way his body was drawn to the light and warmth that damned Uzumaki seemed to radiate like a furnace, a small, human shaped sun while Sakura was a calm, cool presence beside him that promised he wouldn’t get burnt.

Sasuke broke down.

But he was caught mid-fall.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hi everyone! I just went wild with ch10 which imo is sooo good, that I simply
couldn't not share another chapter with you. The sooner the better, don't you think?
A/N 2: And here in ch4 we start seeing what's really bothering Kakashi's new flock
starting with Sasuke. It's kinda evident, but, you know, motivations... Can't simply dunk
the plot on you without them :)
A/N 3: Also, some of you might have noticed by now that the names of the chapters are
actually song names. At first it wasn't a conscious decision on my part, but around ch7
or 8 I noticed this little slip of mine. Well, you can kinda learn about my music taste
from this story too :) 
Anyway, here's a new chapter, off into non-canon wilds we go!
A/N 4: Thank you for all the nice words and kudos! We have already surpassed 1k hits
and I never even thought it could happen to the one of my stories. You people are the
best!
Much love, Kay <3

Coming next: Imada's Teahouse is just another word for T&I. Sakura learned this the
hard way.
Sakura dreaded the bruises that would appear where the skin on her knees broke on the sharp gravel when she leapt forward for Sasuke. She knew Naruto must have sprained his ankle judging by the way it was twisted at a strange angle. She also was absolutely sure they both couldn’t care less as they held their teammate through what was possibly his first mental breakdown since the very Uchiha Incident.

“We're here for you, you stuck up idiot,” Naruto said so gently it nearly made Sakura tear up. The day had been too much of an emotional rollercoaster for her already, but the way Naruto was letting Sasuke know they cared without making it sound hollow like adults usually did was… scarily effective.

“Dobe,” Sasuke ground out through gritted teeth between shuddering deep breaths, his face buried in his teammates’ joined shoulders, “Haruno. You wouldn't if you knew-”

“Oi, cut it, teme! It works both ways for all three-,” he threw a speculative glance at Sakura and frowned as she looked away, hiding her wince by staring at the plaster pieces falling off the bookstore wall. “All three of us might not if we all knew the shit that happened to us. But we're still here.”

“And maybe we should.” Sakura straightened a little, drawing upon Inner's growing forwardness and bluntness. When she was sure she’d gotten the boys’ attention, she sucked in a breath under their guarded stares. “Maybe we should know. We're a team. We can't help each other if we don't know where to look.”

“Sakura-chan's right!” Naruto nudged her a little in the middle of their pile and when the girl didn't push him away he smiled sadly and barely whispered, “I'm sorry for what that bastard did. I had to try to stop him.”

Sakura's eyes flew open, wide and scared. “You knew?”

Naruto squeezed his eyes shut and nodded, “I don't blame you if you hate me now.”

There was a moment of awkward silence before Sasuke asked, “Araigawa?”
“How~” Sakura actually jumped, trying to get away and hide her face at the same time, but four hands held her steady. All this time she had thought only her mom and Ino knew.

She wouldn't be where she was now without Ino and her help. And me~, Inner muttered snippily, but it was true. They were two parts of the whole, but they needed to split in order to stay sane and keep what had become of their mind at bay.

And now she found out others knew about it too. “How?” she repeated helplessly.

“Clan children followed the orders and stayed away, but you didn’t. I remember you offered to help dobe with his kanji once and then disappeared for a week. And Araigawa-” Sasuke refused to call him sensei after he heard the rumors of what the man had done at the Clan's meeting. “He was sent away on a diplomatic mission to Kumo that went straight to hell just after that. Whatever he’d done, it must have been bad.”

Sakura took a breath. And another. And another one. Then she spoke.

“Okay. It was five years ago and I’m okay now. Maybe not really, but I don’t hate you, Naruto.” The boys let out distressed grunts and she hastily eased the hold on them she didn't remember tightening. “Oh, sorry! Are you alright?”

They both nodded and she bumped her forehead against theirs softly, exceptionally thankful to Inner for blocking her panic. She willed the bile threatening to rise at the thought of T&I down and promised, “Just don't make me go anywhere close Imada's Teahouse and we're fine.”

Sasuke met Naruto's heavy stare and the blonde boy hissed, “Over my dead corpse.”

“Corpses are dead by default, dobe.” Sasuke smirked weakly as Naruto bared his teeth at his jibe, but the mood of the conversation became less… oppressive.

“That’s not really necessary! I’d very much prefer if both of you stay alive and well.” Sakura shook her head mirthlessly and sighed into their shared space. “If that’s possible at all. Naruto, you said these… episodes, it happens to you too?”

The boy shifted uncomfortably, not willing to break the contact he was so rarely allowed.

There were things, bad things that made people hate him and recently they were brought to his attention by Mizuki-the-traitor. Part of him still wanted desperately to believe it was all a lie and he had nothing to do with the Kyūbi and the destruction of the village, but it was an explanation for some of strange happenings in his life. Naruto knew now that him being jinchūriki was what made people mad, but it was bearable when they only hurt him. What happened to Sakura… that he couldn’t overlook easily.

“I know I can be too much sometimes... even for me,” he confessed, not really having a slightest idea of what he was going to say. He couldn't just tell Sakura and Sasuke about his ‘problem’, could he? Still, his mouth kept running, letting the words out before he could stop and think them through.

“There are times when it gets so loud, it's hard to stop from doing just about anything to make people listen but no one cares 'bout what I say.” There was sadness in Naruto’s voice he was unable to hide. He held on his teammates like his life depended on it, counting down seconds before they push him away inside his head.

But no shoves or curses came at him, and when he slowly looked up, still trying to trample the hope that burned his insides, there were two pairs of serious eyes, ink black and grass green, watching him. Warily, yes, but without the usual fear of hatred. Naruto choked on his breath and dared to
believe there was something good out there for him.

“So people treat you like shit because of the Fox.” It wasn’t a question really, Sasuke was simply stating the truth. His hand, thin claw-like fingers, narrow palm and all, fell on Naruko’s shoulder and squeezed tightly, while Sakura let out a ragged breath through her gritted teeth.

“I have no clue whose monkey brains decided it was a good idea to stuff a Great Spirit in the child’s body, but once I do, they're gonna suffer,” she muttered darkly while Inner raged on the inside. *When aunt Rensa finds out about this mess, she’s gonna be livid~*, she hissed and Sakura wasn’t inclined to argue to argue.

She had a guess on where that could come from and there was a deep-seated fury within her, but she left it all to Inner. Screaming or threats of bodily harm wouldn’t really be welcome right now. Sakura felt like she kind of overdid it already.

“It hurts you?” she asked instead peering into Naruto’s terrified eyes.

“It’s locked and can’t get away so there’s mostly empty threats, but it’s harder to concentrate when it’s not sleeping. I guess it’s hurting too.” Naruto’s fingers dug into Sakura’s side when he shrugged. “I’d be pissed too if someone chained me like that.”

“How you can manage to sympathize with it, dobe, I have no idea,” Sasuke said just as quietly without looking up.

“I have no control over it, teme.”

“I know the feeling.”

Sakura’s heart broke a little. The boys reminded her so much of the soft, gentle ones they had once been, the ones she barely remembered after years of gloomy silence and fake joviality. It hurt and she wanted it all to change. So she would make it change.

“Then we train and grow stronger so no one can mold us into something we don’t want to be,” she said resolutely and then sagged against two warm bodies, too tired to stay upright. “This has been one hell of a day.”

“Ya don’t say!” Naruto chuckled shakily, still not believing completely that him being… him was okay. That neither I-will-pummel-you-to-smithereens Sakura nor Sasuke the all time bastard didn’t give a single damn about his Fox business or weren’t running away in horror at least was... Amazing. A miracle.

“Tch.”

“I guess we won’t hear anything else from you for a month, huh, teme?” Naruto laughed at Sasuke’s eloquence, letting his head fall on Sakura’s shoulder, dizzy with hope for a brighter future and a team.

“Idiots,” Uchiha sighed quietly and shifted them until Sakura’s back was pressed against the wall, too. When she settled, he dropped his forehead on her other shoulder and whispered to the hemline of her dusty and crumpled red dress, “We’re idiots.”

Sakura just smiled, too exhausted both physically and emotionally to argue. *We are, but it’s alright.*
Kakashi closed his book on the same page he'd opened it fifty seven minutes ago and dispersed the clone on the tree. The kids, all three it turned out, were what some might call damaged goods.

He gnawed on the inside of his cheek thoughtfully.

He was nowhere near as adjusted or qualified to deal with childhood trauma, abandonment issues, and PTSD as he needed to be to handle these three, he truly wasn't. If not for Hokage-sama's direct intervention, the results of his own psych eval would probably have placed him either in nuthouse or on suicide squad (been there, done that, got kicked out to mother hen these three monsters).

So, if Kakashi was completely honest with himself, this assignment wasn't a simple teaching position. It was a political nightmare waiting to happen no matter what he did or didn't do. A smirk twisted his lips into a thin line under his mask as he reviewed his options, which were, truth be told, lacking. Might as well enjoy the process, then.

The Third didn't even bother to pretend he cared for the sake of appearances. The girl was a cast off, the Uchiha was a lamb raised for a slaughter and Naruto, with his dreams and astounding love for Konoha despite what little good it did him? A weapon.

Kakashi knew his orders but he also knew they were counter intuitive to both his skillset and desires. He wasn't qualified to handle the kid...kids. But he found he cared. And that, despite the gambit the Third's shadow had put into action decades ago, changed everything. Without even knowing, Hokage-sama gave Kakashi a carte blanche he wasn't about to pass up.

Three newly minted genin sprang away from each other guiltily when a genjutsu hiding them from the rest of Konoha faded with the sound of Kakashi's 'kai'. What startled him slightly was that Naruto stayed by Sasuke's side with a kunai in hand. Sakura, still wobbly on her probably numb legs, took it upon herself to cover them. And Sasuke, the ‘I wouldn't know what cooperation looked like if it knocked me in the head’ Sasuke, put his hand on Naruto's shoulder, adjusting his stance.

“'ttebayo,” Minato-sensei’s son said flatly (no matter how Minato-like he looked, his mannerisms screamed Kushina). He deflated slightly at the sight of familiar by now unruly mess of silver hair, but didn’t lower his weapon, ready to protect those who accepted him for who he was. Quite unexpected turn of events, Kakashi mused and let his gaze wander to the young kunoichi.

The girl flashed him a toothy grin and, grabbing both boys by their wrists, dragged them towards their sensei.

“Thank you,” she mouthed without a sound and the man felt his eye crinkle in a mirroring smile.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Wow, next day update, can you believe it? I poured all my strength into writing today and so ch11 is finished which means ch5 is up! What a wild ride! I'm feeling so productive, my keyboard must hate me by now :D
A/N 2: We kind of took a look at Sasuke's side of things in the last chapter, so this time it's Sakura and Naruto's time to shine. Oh poor kids.
Thank you all for giving this story a chance and for awesome feedback you give!
Much love, Kay <3
Coming next: Kakashi remembers someone from his past and makes some decisions. Those probably are bad. He does anyway.
bad decisions

Chapter Summary

What does Uzumaki seal mastery do with Kakashi’s new genin?

Chapter Notes

The song for this chapter is Book of Bad Decisions by Clutch
05/19 update: this chapter was beta'd by awesome mpatientdreamr

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Haruno girl was… peculiar and if Kakashi didn't know better he would suspect some Yamanaka style bullshit going on here. One moment she was the epitome of everything that could go wrong with a kunoichi and another she was confidently pushing her way through people’s defenses without any trouble.

While Naruto had seemed absolutely smitten with her for some reason and hung on her every word, after the scene Kakashi just witnessed he would bet there was a not insignificant amount of guilt pushing Naruto to be nice to Sakura despite her shitty attitude towards him. Kakashi also felt compelled to dig around and find whoever Araigawa was and why whatever had happened wasn’t on the girl’s profile.

The shift in the dynamics between Haruno and Uzumaki was more or less within reason, even if improbable. The Uchiha, on the other hand, had been deemed a lost cause by every therapist he’d been forced to visit. They claimed the boy unfit for teamwork on the grounds of ‘severe psychological trauma and overall instability’, so his behavior today seemed completely outside the bounds of reason Kakashi had been expecting.

He had an idea about the identities of said therapists in spite the lack of names in the young Uchiha’s file, some he had probably met in person and none of them had ever done him any good. Against his better judgement Kakashi couldn't ignore the similarities he and Sasuke shared, so in his own twisted way he empathized with the boy.

Most possibly his isolation immediately after the Incident had been used not only to create an image of a victim, but to separate Sasuke from his peers and strip him of their support. By the time he was out of the hospital, reports said, most of the kids had already made their assumptions from village gossip and stayed away from him, either terrified that his friends would end up like his clan, or… Kakashi wasn’t really sure what to think of the boy’s fanclub, where Sakura had seemed to be a permanent resident until today. But was she really?

By all means Sasuke’s withdrawal into himself was predicted and, at some point, even endorsed by those in power, leading to the disaster of this morning's introductions. He had been projecting his desire to have nothing in common with his new team loud and clear. What had happened instead?

The boy got manhandled and repeatedly snapped at by Sakura, thrown in the situation that led to
emotional breakdown and then, (to the surprise of everyone involved, except maybe Naruto who was as unpredictable and unexpected as a tornado in Lightning Country) received long overdue but much needed support.

Kakashi wasn’t a psychologist or anything even remotely suited to dealing with this crap, but one thing he knew for sure: the Uchiha finding what had the potential to become his pillar of strength instead of closing off completely hadn’t been in anyone’s plans when Team Seven was formed.

Hatake Kakashi had his official orders: make sure Haruno, Uzumaki and Uchiha passed his test and participated in the next chūnin exam. The girl would be a throwaway after that, another forever genin if she didn’t die first. The hardest part came with the boys - in their future there was only darkness.

Sasuke would probably be indoctrinated into Root, because the Third, no matter how level-headed he seems to be, is nothing but a sentimental sap when it comes to Danzō, Kakashi thought spitefully, stomping towards his residence. Hokage let my attempt on his life slide like it was nothing because he knew who was behind it! To cover the disappearance of the last loyal Uchiha would be as easy as breathing for him.

And Naruto, as the jinchūriki of the Kyuubi, will be forever bound to the village, feared and scorned and trained to become a mindless weapon. It’s just a matter of time before he breaks and surrenders to the will of the Council.

None of them deserved any of this.

Shaking his head, the jōnin glanced back at the panting trio that was trudging after him up the stairs of a shabby apartment complex. Sweaty and covered in dust, they were watching him closely, afraid that he’d bolt again.

“Are we there yet?” Naruto whined as soon as he caught onto Kakashi’s attention, his face mimicking Kushina’s pout perfectly, and the man’s heart skipped a beat.

Orders or not, the Haruno girl had opened the particular can of worms that was Naruto’s heritage and now he couldn’t unsee Minato-sensei and Kusina in him.

If I’m going to defy Hokage’s will, Kakashi pondered the idea of treason grimly, already knowing where his loyalties lay, then I might as well go all out with it. Consequences? Innocent till proven guilty and people had always said he was damn good at playing innocent.

His black mask hid a bloodthirsty grin, but did nothing to cover the sharp spike of killing intent. But Kakashi wasn’t a legend even among the ANBU for nothing, so it dissipated momentarily before the kids even had a chance to recognize the nature of the chills that ran down their spines.

“Pile in, my cute little genin,” he hummed lightly and opened the door into his small apartment, subtly deactivating the seal on the threshold.

Naruto, true to his usual curious self, barged in first and spun around on one leg, shaking his worn sandals off while taking in the spartan surroundings. Sakura and Sasuke followed after him at a much calmer pace. Manners clearly weren’t completely lost on those two.

As soon as everybody was in, Kakashi locked the door again and filtered some chakra into the intricate seal system that ran through the whole apartment, effectively stopping all sound from leaving the living room and tiny adjacent kitchen. He flicked the lights on and pondered adding another seal to the windowsill just in case, consciously trying to ignore the presence of someone else.
in his personal space.

It proved impossible because Naruto kept wandering the sparse room, Sakura attached herself to the bookshelf and was trying for nonchalant, but her eyes grew wider and wider with every new title she saw, and Sasuke stood frozen at the entrance, no doubt feeling trapped in the unknown space. After a brief moment of hesitation, Kakashi forced his body to relax, slumping into the couch and told the kids to suit themselves.

All he wanted to do was bang his head at the nearest wall. Now that his bunch of young monsters were seated on the dusty floor of his rarely used for anything other than sleeping apartment, the gravity of Sakura’s words finally sank in. The girl wanted to become a sealmaster? That wasn’t that uncommon among clan children, just not with Konoha’s clan brats and definitely not with this generation. And it was a strange career choice for a kunoichi from a civilian family.

The only time Kakashi had ever heard about Four Greater Seals was from Kushina back when Obito and Rin were still alive and pestered her relentlessly about her main seal. Not the jinchūriki seal which had always been safely hidden, but her main one. A beautiful thread of light and ink that sprung to life at the summoner’s will, it created chains that were powerful enough to bind strongest of enemies, even spirits and demons. She used to call it ‘gold’.

But Kushina was dead and there wasn’t a person in Konoha proficient in seals enough to know about those beside him anymore, no one to remember her tales.

“Gold, Rust, Diamond and Dust, these Four Greater Seals were created during the Warring Period by Uzumaki Nao, a woman of the brightest mind and most immense power. Gold is for will and nature; it serves for protection and only obeys those who commit to the cause. Rust is for blood and steel; it seeks justice and gives as much as is given. Diamond is chakra and power; it grants greatness but only obeys those rigorous and disciplined. Dust is all what’s left; it grants life to flesh and bone and demands an ultimate sacrifice.

These seals are an Uzushio specialty, known only to Uzumaki by blood. I have ‘gold’, as my sensei, Uzumaki Aishi did and her grandmother before her. Tsunade-sama, one of the legendary Sannin, bears ‘diamond’ on her forehead. Uzumaki Mito-sama, her grandmother, had it also and she had been taught by Nao-sama herself.

Rust’ is unclaimed. It was always kept in a separate clan and that one was wiped out with the destruction of the Uzushio. Dust cannot be mastered outside of the time of the greatest need. It takes all to give all.

Those who achieve the final stage of the seal, are granted it’s rank. Golden Goddess, Queen of Rust, Diamond Princess and Master of Dust, post mortem.”

Kakashi remembered the day Kushina told Team Seven this with crystal clarity because it was the very day a bloodied body was dumped on Minato-sensei’s doorstep. He winced under his mask at the memory of Kushina’s apprentice, the foreign girl. What was her real name? Something about chains, Kusari? Tessa?

He had rarely met the redhead in those three years she’d been hanging around, but she did leave an impression. He stumbled onto her in Minato-sensei’s home once with the skin on her forearms and thighs cut open (he’d seen a lot by then but still nearly puked his guts outright in his mask). She was cursing like a sailor, adding new wounds to her bronze skin with sensei’s three-pronged kunai, but
there was no blood, only cut up skin and those incisions were knitting back together as soon as the blade left them. Kakashi only saw her for a moment, then Kushina appeared out of the living room with stack of scrolls and ink and shooed him away.

He had asked Minato-sensei about her after that, not quite as annoyingly as Obito or Rin did, but the man only shook his head in defeat.

“Don't argue with Uzu women when they're at it,” he sighed with a tired smile and the matter had been dropped.

The foreign girl wasn’t an Uzumaki, but her clan (even its name somehow managed to slip from his memory) was related to them as everyone in Uzushio were, really, if her red hair and the containment seal on her palm were anything to go by. Kakashi probably would have gone to her for answers now, but he hadn’t heard of her since she disappeared during the last war. There was no one else left to ask.

Sakura had said her aunt knew and mastered one of the Four Greater Seals... Could it be she was an Uzumaki? More so, a sealmaster. Maybe someone buried too deep in ANBU even for him to know?

Kakashi felt Obito’s eye twitch under his forehead protector as he relaxed further in the old couch with a sigh worthy of an old man. Was he getting old?

Gai would probably take great delight in telling him he needed to eat more or enjoy his life more. Kakashi shuddered at the memory of his green and upbeat Rival’s idea of Enjoying His Youth To The Fullest and forced his mind back to the reason for his trip down the memory lane.

The three genin were sitting side by side on the floor before him, waiting.

Sasuke existed (for a lack of better word) with his back firmly pressed to the bookshelf and staring at the ceiling with a vacant expression on his face. His elbow rested in the crook of Sakura’s left hand, the only point of connection, but Kakashi saw it for what it really was - acceptance.

The girl chose a crosslegged position with her chin propped carefully on the open palm of the left hand, perfect image of ignorance on her face as to not spook Sasuke. Her green eyes were tracing the movements of her other hand - the one she was threading slowly through Naruto’s hair as if he was an human-shaped cat.

Minato-sensei’s son and Konoha’s jinchūriki was sprawled on the floor with his head in Sakura’s lap and an absolutely dazed expression on his face. Once given blanket permission for physical contact, he seemed to be trying to make the most of it before the girl started having second thoughts. There was a strange sound coming from his rhythmically rising and falling chest, almost like... Gai challenge me to run laps in high heels, he’s purring! Kakashi choked on his breath.

He honestly missed the moment it began, too far away in his musings. It was both deeply disturbing and downright hilarious. The Uchiha boy must have noticed the purring too, because the corners of his lips crept up almost against his will.

Then Naruto cracked one of his impossibly blue eyes open and stage whispered, “Sakura-chan, didya see? I did it!”

“Yeah, you did,” she smiled, watching Sasuke struggling to put his poker face back in place, and flicked blonde’s nose gently. “You win this one, but I'm onto you.”
“Children,” the Uchiha muttered and lightly jabbed Sakura in the ribs with his elbow.

“Says who,” she retorted with a smirk as Naruto rolled off her legs and scrambled into a sitting position with a wide grin on his face.

“Get used to it, teme!”

“Why would they do this to me?” Sasuke asked no one in particular. But despite the dull tone, the shadow of a smile was still hiding in the curve of his lips.

Kakashi stared at their antics in fascination. Of course he could and maybe even had to remind them about the rules and shinobi code and not getting too attached, but these three kids already somehow became what his team never got a chance to be, not in the least because Kakashi had been a messed up menace back then. He still was now, but at the old age of twenty six he hoped he managed to become a responsible messed up menace.

*I have no idea how,* he thought, feeling determination settle in his chest, *but this Team Seven will work out.*

Seeing the genin got a little rest after their eventful chase, Kakashi sat up on the couch and clapped his hands to get their attention. They straightened almost immediately and stared at him with various degrees of interest and concern.

“You said you want to follow your aunt's footsteps, Sakura-chan?” Kakashi hummed nonchalantly, searching girl's face for any trace of deception, but found only a guarded smile.

“Yeah. She does her best to protect the village, so we haven’t really had a chance to meet yet. But I’ve read journals, hers and her master's.”

Was it a deliberate choice of words or not, the girl sounded like she hadn't really known the suspicious sealmaster. ‘*Does her best*’ meant the unknown woman was still alive or the young kunoichi at least thought so.

“So she’s Haruno…” Kakashi trailed off, giving Sakura a chance to finish the sentence, essentially giving him the name of an unknown shinobi.

“No, she’s not a Haruno!” Sakura shook her head, making her pink locks slap Sasuke and Naruto in their faces. The boys groaned in unison, spitting out the hair and she quickly pulled it up in a messy bun, before explaining further.

“She's mom's second cousin or something like that. Her name is Rensa. She’s strong and cool and I'm growing my hair out to be like her!”

*Chains… Rensa.* Kakashi felt stupid. Of course he knew Kanasabi Rensa - the same foreign girl that was a constant source of his and the rest of his genin teammates' exasperated curiosity back in his teenage years. She had appeared at Minato-sensei’s doorstep half dead just a couple of months after he’d taken his mostly genin team. She had been Kushina's apprentice before joining ANBU three years later.

Kakashi closed his only visible eye and listened to the blood pounding in his ears.

Kanasabi Rensa had been dead for fifteen years and in an attempt to give Sakura a kunoichi role model, her mother apparently refrained from telling the girl this fact. More so, gave her the *journals*.
What a devotion.

It also explained this Four Great Seals business because if Kushina had one… Another one probably had been Kanasabi's project all along. A separate clan for 'Rust', who better than the Kanasabi, rust literally?

Kakashi took to learning sealwork from Kushina after the foreign girl left, but, even though he was a genius, the woman never had time to teach him something more complicated than alarm systems, barriers, traps and containment (and those were his absolute worst). He only had a year before sensei asked him to join ANBU to watch over Kushina and nine months later the Fox broke free.

I’ll need to see those notes sooner or later if I’m going be any help in at least decoding them... The man rubbed the back of his neck and smiled at Sakura under his mask. He wasn’t exactly planning to shatter the girl's delusions about her aunt being alive, not today.

“You know, Sakura-chan,” he said instead, “only very strong shinobi can afford such luxury as long hair. Any enemy ninja will be tempted to use it against you, so maybe you should make sure it's out of the way. At least until you're a chūnin.”

He was prepared for a fit of temper. It was a quite usual reaction to his 'attempt on the femininity/clan traditions’ of new ANBU recruits but the girl just measured him up with a thoughtful gaze and nodded affirmative.

“Yes, sensei, I’ll take that into consideration. Thank you.”

Haruno Sakura was peculiar indeed. Kakashi let himself wonder if it would be enough to explain what he was planning to do with this team to Hokage once the rumors started.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: A lot of people asked me about this four seals business and although I planned to place an explanation later on, it kind of threw itself in. So, it's world building time! Some names you know already because I love fitting canon in my ideas, some names are new and will play a role in later events.
A/N 2: Also...phew, this chapter is big. Be prepared, my internal barriers snapped and it means I'm back to my usual biggo chapters, not 10k yet, but stable 2-3k.
And thank you, people who leave feedback! You make my day and inspire me to write further!
Much love, Kay <3

Coming next: Sakura comes out about her 'condition'. Freakouts and cuddles ensue.
Chapter Summary

Final assessment of Team Seven is not what the office might have expected. Good thing Kakashi doesn't plan to dispel their illusions.

Chapter Notes

The song for this chapter is Champion by Fall Out Boy

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sakura was lying face down on her bed, too tired to move a finger. She was trying to fall asleep and failing spectacularly for the past hour and a half. The events of the day were a whirlwind in her head.

A real team, she thought giddily, Team Seven!

Good, good, you had your fun, now SLEEP! ~ Inner bellowed on top of her nonexistent lungs, making Sakura flinch. Even if that part of her was solely imaginary, her ears hurt very real.

“You don’t seem excited,” the girl muttered into the pillow, but obediently willed her body to relax and began taking deep breaths to slow her heartbeat.

Turn over, idiot, or you’ll suffocate us both to death~

The boys are a bad influence on you, you know, Sakura thought smugly. It’s been one day and you’re already as grouchy as Sasuke.

Oi, shut it!~

And now you’re channeling Naruto…

Well, they are idiots and now you surely act like one, Sa-ku-ra-chan~

“Oh gods, what did I do to deserve you?” The girl sighed, letting the puff of hot air sink into the pillow, and rolled on her back. “Happy now? Then shut it. I can’t sleep when you’re being obnoxious.”

I’m being responsible!~ Inner did a little wiggly dance in their shared mindscape and shook her imaginary hands in the air. And you’re not! We have our first training practice tomorrow and you’re wasting our resting time!~

“I’m recollecting,” Sakura retorted with another long groan. Her body was tired, but her mind - divided mind - was racing, straining to process what Kakashi-sensei had told her and the boys yesterday.
Team Seven had received their first orders.

“Listen closely, because I'm only saying it once,” Kakashi-sensei told them gravely and Sakura shivered under his suddenly heavy gaze. The lazy, relaxed man disappeared in a blink of an eye, leaving a collected and intimidating shinobi in his stead.

*Whoa, if this is how ANBU captains are, I kinda want us to become one~*, Inner whispered then, awed by an abrupt change. They weren't able to bicker anymore after that because the information their sensei spared threw Sakura's mind into chaos.

Well, Naruto being the son of the Fourth wasn't exactly any news, but it was good to finally get a confirmation of her assumptions. It also proved he and Sakura were really distantly related and made her wonder why her parents had never even let them talk.

Explanation to that one came in next, filling her with even more questions and barely controlled anger. Hokage's decree forbidding anyone from telling Naruto the truth about his parents and his status among the villagers? That wasn't how people should treat anyone connected to a Great Spirit.

*Jinchūriki, what an idiotic word! Container, not even a person!~*

“You have figured that one out already, that's the only reason I'm telling you about it. You can discuss it and ask for clarification now, but as soon as you leave the safety of my apartment, I want you to keep your mouths shut or…” Sensei paused his speech, letting the gravity of the situation sink in, and Naruto gulped audibly, wide blue eyes staring up hopelessly.

“We all will be punished,” the blond boy half asked, half stated.

Kakashi-sensei cocked his head to the left and stared at them hard. Even the mask did nothing to hide his derision. “Me? Probably, but not that bad, I am a valuable tool of the village after all. Sasuke as Uchiha, hypothetically, too. They wouldn't hurt you also, at least not openly, if they want to ever use you again, right?”

“Whatever they do, the damned Fox will probably heal me back,” Naruto muttered and stuffed his clenched fist in the pockets of his orange jacket, hoping to hide the trembling in his fingers.

“Who's they?” Sasuke demanded sharply, his voice wavering.

“T&I scum like Mizuki,” Naruto spit out and then bolted upright, suddenly struck by a realization.

“Hey, they won't do that to Sakura again! They can't!”

Kakashi-sensei measured her with a long appraising stare and his visible part of the face did something strange, a grimace Sakura couldn’t interpret. “No, they won’t. They'll simply get rid of her.”

“But that’s so wrong!”

“Hush!” Sakura reached out and pulled him back before he did something stupid, her other hand already fisted in the fabric of Sasuke’s shirt, holding him in place. “That’s politics, Naruto, and I am not that important to spend resources on brainwashing me, am I right?” She caught Kakashi-sensei’s inquisitive gaze and held it. “Not that it would work on me.”

“And why is that so?”

Sakura released her hold on Sasuke and used Naruto as a lever to stand up. With a mix of fear and trepidation she quickly ran her fingers through Boar-Ram-Snake-Boar seals and then tapped fer
forehead twice just above the right brow. Chakra flow sped up, obeying her will, and a spot the girl had touched started to glow a soft violet.

“You’ve heard us speak about Ah… Araigawa,” she stumbled on the name of the man whose hypnotizing voice haunted her for long five years. “It was a genjutsu he put me in. He broke something in my mind and I didn’t know who I was anymore.”

That was a very abridged version of the truth, but even it made Sakura queasy all over again. She made a motion to hug herself, but cut it short, remembering where she was and who was in front of her. Kakashi-sensei looked like a hound that sensed prey, sharp eyes boring holes in her, fingers deceptively relaxed, but ready to form handseals at any moment.

“So the split in your mind protects you from any mental invasion?” he asked in a low rumble that sent shivers up her spine.

Sakura wanted to run for her life, not be frozen here under this scrutiny, but she was a shinobi too now and she stood her ground.

“No,” she and Inner both replied at once. They knew for sure that wasn’t it. “My friend found me in the outskirts of T&I and took me to hospital. At least that's what she said. Medic-nin could do nothing to heal me, so I was released home and my friend taught me this technique.”

“Niki Isshin, Two Minds, One Heart.” The jōnin leaned forward and looked at her seriously, contemplating her story. “It is a Yamanaka clan thing, Sakura. An A-rank jutsu used for undercover operations. Does your friend’s father know she had given it to the outsider?”

Sakura bit her lip with so much force, her teeth drew blood. She knew she had to come clean about the technique before sensei found out about it on his own and thought she had stolen it, but she also put Ino's safety at risk. She felt her knees starting to give as she whispered, “I’ve never spoken to anyone about it before, sensei.”

Panic rose in Sakura's chest and the sense of vertigo overcame her. Was she falling? The voice, loud and angry surrounded her, swallowed her whole, pulled her into darkness.

“That’s for talking to that wretched creature!

Pain - piercing, throbbing, crushing - bloomed inside Sakura’s skull like a beautiful carnivorous flower. It devoured everything that was within reach, clawed at her memories with monstrous force.

“That’s for feeding it!

Another hit, but this time it was poison spilling on her pliant, unprepared mind. Little could survive its tidal wave that erased anything it touched.

“That’s for helping the demon!

A rusty knife slowly sinking into the flesh, splitting what was once whole into pieces. Pitch blackness of the illusion reached its crescendo and Sakura shattered. The pain disappeared as suddenly as it came, leaving a broken child alone with her nightmares.

“Ino is an annoying loudmouth, but she isn't stupid, Kakashi-sensei. She wouldn't risk it without her
father knowing,” she heard someone say through the furious pounding of blood in her ears, deafening in its magnitude.

There were hands on her shoulders, holding her upright and helping to sit down. Not gentle, not at all, but warm and steady and she leaned in without thinking. It felt familiar, smelt familiar - like old dust, crumbling cement and wood polish. *Naruto,* she thought, *and Sasuke.*

“You're wasting your resources, Haruno. Release the jutsu,” the latter barked at her darkly, but the sound of his voice was a distant echo of the only dream that chased her for years.

She blinked through the haze clouding her vision and came to Inner’s outraged hissing about chakra exhaustion, Naruto's worried stare and Sasuke's tired one. Unsure if she could manage it at all in her shaken state, Sakura asked sensei's permission to drop the technique and when he nodded, used the seals in reverse order. Two pale fingers bumped into the tenketsu on her forehead when her hands refused to move up and suddenly she keeled over, able to breathe again.

“Sorry,” she whispered weakly, but Kakashi-sensei just smiled at her with that lazy crinkly eye-smile of his and slouched back into the couch with a satisfied huff, once again a teacher, not ANBU in disguise.

“You're good,” he said at length, “no stamina whatsoever, but better than average chakra control. Quick, strong mind. A-rank jutsu on top of that, it will come in handy. I hope you're stubborn, Sakura-chan, because endurance training will be one hell of a ride for you.?’

The girl clasped her forearms as tight as possible, still a little wobbly and shaky from chakra drain, and bowed her head resolutely. “I'll do my best.”

“Good. Sasuke… Rookie of the year.”

The boy nodded silently in agreement, but he kept watching the jōnin before him warily, ready for another shoe to drop. And Kakashi didn't make him wait too long.

“Stamina, chakra control, four D-rank and two C-rank techniques, reports paint you nearly picture perfect. So I have for you one question only: did they botch your psych eval or you're that good at faking?”

“Like they wouldn't pass me even if I missed the appointment,” Uchiha actually scoffed in response.

“Did you actually skip it?” Sakura couldn't help but ask. Hers had been a pure forty minutes long nightmare that would end bloody if not for Inner's backup. Sasuke just watched her with one brow raised like she was insane. That could both be yes and no, but she decided to leave it for later. If she was going to die running laps soon, she wanted to know how the boys would suffer before it happened.

“Teamwork for you then. Sakura will make sure you don't slack off,” Kakashi-sensei interrupted their little staring contest happily, obviously taking a great joy in Sasuke's disquiet, then turned to the last member of Team Seven.

“Naruto!” The boy's wandering gaze snapped from disgruntled Sasuke’s back to his sensei and he nearly buzzed with energy, eager to hear his assessment. “Great reserves thanks to your Uzumaki heritage and Kyūbi, good stamina and grasp on one A-rank jutsu. But!” Kakashi-sensei squinted at the blonde suspiciously, “no patience whatsoever and, boy, are you even literate?”
To Sakura's mute horror her teammate didn't start boasting immediately. Worse, he almost shrunk in size, trying not to look at anyone in the room. When the silence stretched for too long he finally tore his eyes from a splintered floorboard at the kitchen entrance and muttered, “I have no idea what those Academy jerks told you, but I can read. I'm just not really good at it.”

“Great,” Kakashi said flatly and turned to Sakura with a dangerous gleam in his grey eye. “I need him at Academy grade four by the end of the month. You plan it, Sasuke helps, I don't care for the means, but we start seal basics then. For all three of you. And if he blows you up... You only have yourselves to blame.”

She bit her lip again and winced, tasting dried blood. Both boys were staring at their sensei like he was a madman, but she couldn't deny the rationality of his orders. Naruto really did need help with basics (he had no history education whatsoever!), Sasuke was awful at cooperation and she sucked at taijutsu and even simple running, but was probably able to plan a full blown assault operation in the go. Sensei really saw them through.

“If you want to become a Hokage, you can't be an empty-headed powerhouse, Naruto!” she groaned when the boy pouted, full of offense.

“What she said,” Sasuke agreed, clearly attempting to use his comrade as a distraction and trying get into Sakura's good graces already.

Smart boy~, Inner crooned cruelly and flashed a toothy grin at him. Truly terrifying sight, Sakura decided and mimicked it perfectly. “And you, Sasuke-kun~”

Gods, she could swear she saw him shudder at her saccharine voice. He's probably having flashbacks to our fangirling stage!~

“You're not going to embark on your avenging adventure alone,” Sakura said forcefully. “We're the team and in this team we're gotta work together and strike together. Deal?” she practically growled, letting her and Inner's voice mix and reverb in her throat.

Too busy watching startled boys for the signs of mutiny, Sakura didn't catch Kakashi-sensei's satisfied chuckle.

She was a smart kid and quickly caught up with his plan, but he wasn't an ANBU captain for nothing also. She would be his second, making sure the team meets all technical qualifications, while he would teach them how to survive.

Kakashi was one of the best, so he'll train them until they become the best too. And maybe an elusive dream that had been pushing him forward all these years would prove to be within his reach after all.

For the first time in a long while Sakura slept undisturbed by any nightmares. Her dreams smelt dust, old cement and wood polish instead. And, for some reason, dogs.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Ow-wow, I never expected to receive so many positive comments on this story!
I'm really happy you guys like it!

A/N 2: This is the last chapter dealing with the aftermaths of the first day of Team Seven. One can say, we're wrapping the introductory part now :)

I send a huge hug to every person who left feedback on this story, you are the best!

Much love, Kay <3

Coming next: Sasuke kind of thinks he can work with Sakura. It doesn't mean she doesn't scare the shit out of him.
true colors

Chapter Summary

Sasuke observes Sakura in her natural habitat.

Chapter Notes

The song for this chapter is True Colors by Kesha

See the end of the chapter for more notes

January 11th, year 2019 since the birth of the Sage of Six Paths

Buzzing 6 a.m. alarm clock squeaked and died down under Sakura's clenched fist. She rolled off her bed, sending sheets of paper everywhere and stretched vigorously, looking at her handiwork - a study plan written on a momiji patterned yellowish notebook page in her neat handwriting. She was really proud of that one.

She had woken up at four in the morning to start her preparations. Rushing through her Academy notes and papers she penned down topics and techniques vital for every shinobi. Some were marked by a spiral - the ones Naruto was most likely to suck in, some by a circle or simplified fan - those she and Sasuke were proficient enough to explain by her estimation.

Surely all things taijutsu were in Sasuke's department. Ninja tools too because while Sakura knew the theory and was acceptable at throwing kunai she was nowhere close to the clan brat.

Diplomacy and negotiation went to her. Good luck with that~, Inner cackled, but Sakura payed her no mind, being diplomatic, mind you. History was an easy subject for her too, able to sit through the most boring lectures because she knew: way too often why, not just what and when were important.

Naruto, unfortunately, didn't seem to share the sentiment in the Academy so she had to make sure there were enough fun or morbid facts for him to create sort of chain connections to. Maybe Sasuke would come up with something useful too, she hoped, but with a shadow of doubt.

She wasn't really sure of where they stood with each other after the chaos and anguish that had been yesterday. Not enemies, not strangers, but not friends either. We can get there one day, she thought, trying for positive.

Sakura checked the list again and, surprising even herself, underlined traps and capture. Naruto could be really good at it, she decided knowing his love for pranks and the rate of their teachers falling for them (nearly 86 percent because Iruka-sensei was unbeatable and yes, Sakura kept that count).

At the bottom of the list was Kakashi-sensei's most bizarre point - 識字, literacy. One look at these two kanji filled her with a well-founded trepidation. How the hell was she to help Naruto learn what most kids knew by the age of eight?
Well, actually she had an idea (and acted on it already) but how others, Kakashi-sensei included, would react to it was remaining to be seen. The knock on her windowsill broke her out of the thinking process.

“Oh, shit!” she swore silently, knowing her father was already up, and bolted to let another early bird in.

“Seems like we’ll have to add punctuality to the list of things dobe has to learn,” Sasuke offered instead of greetings, slithering through the open window on the second floor.

He hid his surprise at Haruno’s outfit - simple knee-length black pants instead of green she wore daily and customary kunoichi binds, but no blindingly red dress in sight - and took a sweeping look at her small but cozy room, so different from his own barren living space.

Plain white walls were unexpected as was the lack of girly things he came to associate his fanclub with. No countless bottles, clothes items or posters of that hyper-popular movie star half of the girls and some of the boys in their class couldn't stop squealing about.

Sasuke shuddered at the thought of vampires. Drinking blood was absolutely a mental illness, not a ‘hot kink’ how crazy Yamanaka put it. Getting stuck at the age of nineteen sounded like a more or less okay idea, but glinting in the sun? No, it was pure ridiculousness. It didn't help that some of his damned fanclub thought Sasuke looked just like one of main characters of the movie. He kind of grudgingly respected Sakura for not jumping on that particular hype train.

Anyway, if someone of his team was an eldritch being, it was Haruno herself. Her split mind was unnerving on paper and actually freaky in reality. While Sasuke counted himself observant, he didn't even notice anything strange going on with her until she started to uncoil that jutsu. And now that she started, her behavior was one hell of a ride going from meek to passive aggressive to I'll-punch-holes-in-the-walls-with-your-head aggressive in the span of three minutes.

*Is it too bad to hope she'll find her balance somewhere in the middle?* Sasuke thought, staring vacantly at some spot on his right.

Bickering with her actually made him feel real. If she was touchy-feely or angry with him, or whatever else her crooked mind spawned, she either hid it entirely or unleashed it on him directly without petty lies or condescension like most adults did. In a way she was just like Naruto, constantly reminding Sasuke of his existence. Also, while she lied and was good at it, she chose to tell them the truth.

Haruno was kneeling on the floor, picking up the pages, blank and filled with diagrams, notebooks and scrolls. She didn't say anything since he entered, giving him a chance to acclimatize to new surroundings and so he continued his study of her room.

There was potted gray-leafed ivy on the very edge of the windowsill climbing its way across the corner and up the old cracked shelves above Sakura’s bed. They were filled with books on shinobi history, tactics and anatomy. Mixed by topic, they went from white, beige and red covers to thin violet one at the end of the upper shelf. The middle was filled with blues and greens and the lower was for browns and blacks.

Another plant, not flower but a different kind of ivy (and yet again gray, Sasuke noted in passing) was placed by the opposite from the window wall between the door and a low dresser. Long stems crept up the wall by small hooks where, judging by less faded patches of paint, pictures once hung.
Sasuke followed their direction and blinked at the reflection of himself in the mirror above the dresser.

He felt and looked like an alien in this clearly lived in room that was nothing he had envisioned, but somehow screamed ‘Sakura’. Where his place was efficiently empty of everything not absolutely necessary, hers, not bigger than three by two meters, was methodically packed. There were scrolls under the bed, on a tiny desk by the window he had jumped over without noticing, on top of the dresser, everywhere. They were stacked neatly in groups by color of the rim. Ideal system to never find anything, Sasuke mused. He was brought up in a military clan and even four years of solitary living didn’t beat minimalism and order out of him. Not like Sakura didn’t have an order to her things, it was just… odd.

Deep in thought he turned to the only unoccupied wall on his left. It was empty except for a big standing out on a faded paint rectangle where something used to be hanging for a long time.

“I took the map down,” Sakura picked the last notebook from the floor and followed the direction of his gaze. “We need space for planning and I don’t think we’re going out of the village soon, so…”

She trailed off, turning away to make her bed. Even the sheets and covers were white like walls, a stark contrast to black furniture. The room is nearly monochrome save for the books, Sasuke realized belatedly, watching her readjust pale gray quilt until it lined up with the bedding perfectly.

“No pink?” he raised a brow at the mild case of OCD in front of him.

“My hair is enough pink for this place, Sasuke. I don’t like bright colors.”

He felt his brow rise even higher in response to her contradictory statement and quickly schooled his face into the neutral expression. “You wear red dress every day.”

“Oh-huh. Makes people look at it, not me. Don’t tell me you didn’t use us fangirls for the same reason.” Sakura smiled chidingly at him and dropped a piece of parchment in his hands. “Here’s what I came up with, anything to add?”

He scanned the page once, nodding automatically at the notes she had made. History, good. Diplomacy, huh… Does she really plan to train him in politics? Sasuke’s frown deepened at the thought. He never had a chance to sit in the Konoha Council meeting, but there were plenty Uchiha clan meetings held at his house. In the very room they’ve been… No!

He shook his head to clear suddenly racing thoughts and found Sakura staring at him warily. Without Naruto’s exuberant presence they both didn’t know what to make of each other or rather how to act. Not exactly strangers… Mission partners, Sasuke decided, pushing everything besides their current assignment to the back of his mind. It was safer this way.

“You want to explain Konoha politics to him, how?” he asked, tapping corresponding bullet point.

“I’m friends with Ino, you know. She’s a clan brat. Sometimes we talk.” Seeing his mortified expression, the girl dropped onto the bed and outright leered at him “Not about you, Sasuke~. She might be into you, but it doesn’t negate having brains!”

Didn’t seem like it for past year or so. What does she call you, Forehead-something?” he snapped back defensively. Haruno-the-number-two-fan not jumping his bones was nice, but the insinuation was clearly uncalled for.
“Cut it, hot stuff~,” she chuckled again in that unnatural saccharine voice of hers, stood up, and pointed at the paper in his hands before turning to the mirror. “Mission first, banter later.”

Sasuke stared at sparkly gray fans, orange spirals and black circles in confusion.

“Why these marks?” he asked, carefully perching on the edge of the wobbly desk.

“Well, Naruto is Uzumaki, so spiral.” Sakura shrugged, rummaging through the upper drawer of her dresser. “Fans are obvious too, really, Sasuke.”

She dug something black from the sea of red (finally, color, here it is!) that was probably her dresses and shook it in the air, helping the fabric straighten. It turned out to be a simple t-shirt with a white circle on the back. Sakura tugged it on, adjusted the binds and flopped on the floor cross-legged in front of him. “The circle is a clanless symbol, you've seen it thousand times in Academy, but people rarely care for it. Happy?”

“Half of our class was clanless, of course I know,” Sasuke muttered, trying hard not to remember the day noisy Inuzuka brat had asked him if he was going to wear circle too now. They had a mean fight and stinky moron ended up with even meaner shiner half of his face. Too bad Umino-sensei intervened before Sasuke could paint Kiba’s whole face red.

Sakura's expression did that creepy thing again like she was on the verge of apologizing and punching something at once. “I didn't mean you, Sasuke,” she said in the end in a hollow voice.

The corner of his lip twitched, threatening to bare his teeth, but he willed it to stop and took a deep breath, thankful for her at least not 'being sorry' for what happened. He was so sick of hearing it, fake words from people who didn't even know him.

“Why these colors?” he asked in the end, pushing their attention back to the leaf-printed paper. “Dobe is ecstatic over orange, so that I get. You live practically in grayscale.” Sasuke shook the page in the air and groaned quietly, peering at her from above, “Tell me, Haruno, why the fans are SPARKLY?”

The girl stared at him blankly for a moment and then answered in a low, breathless voice, “Because I know you're a vampire, Sasuke~.”

“What?” he squeaked weakly, inwardly cursing the moment they had made a deal to meet at her place at 6 a.m. to start working on a schedule. He was going to take all nice things he thought about her back. She was a danger to society. And where was Naruto when Sasuke needed him the most?

“Relax, I just used the first pen I fished from the box.” She snatched the paper out if his hand and beckoned him closer. Sasuke felt like growing roots into the desk so he won't be moved. After yet another staring contest (he didn't blink first, he absolutely did not), the pink-headed monster of a teammate that everybody believed to be as innocent as an unborn child (run while you can, you fools!) pursed her lips disapprovingly.

“You'd better get over here if you don't want to be run over by Naruto. Oops, too late.” she muttered detachedly a second before something warm and wet crashed into Sasuke's back, toppling him onto the floor.

Chapter End Notes
A/N: First of all, I LOVE this chapter. It finally gave me a chance to show Sakura from another's point of view and how she is in her territory. Also, frightened Sasuke is always a bonus, don't you think?

A/N 2: Trigger warning, Twilight references and a lil bit of joking here cause I suck at pop culture and have no Idea what's popular now. Hence, references to the last franchise I've heard about during my time at university :D

A/N 3: I've been planning to say it long ago, but somehow always forget when I type the author's notes: I'm really terrified every time I upload a chapter because I have no idea if you guys are going to like or hate the direction we're going. The story that was planned as a mini is now officially second longest I've ever written (omg we're really going to get some revolution in 40-ish or 50-ish chapters, I promise).

And what helps me to overcome this fear of disappointing you is your fantastic feedback. Thank you all lovely persons who left comments! You are great and you should know it!

Much love, Kay <3

Coming next: Naruto needs some help believing it all is real
Chapter Summary

Sometimes the line between illusion and reality becomes too blurred.

Chapter Notes

The song for this chapter is Animal Soul by AURORA

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Do we even want to know what happened?~ Inner whined as Sakura stared at the colorful pile of limbs on her floor.

No, probably not, she answered with a sigh, rubbed her temples and carefully tucked the plan away.

But you're going to ask anyway~

Yeah.

She found where Sasuke ended and Naruto started and pulled them apart, wincing at the sight of dark spots on their clothes. Naruto's jacket was for some reason soaked with something... foul. That moved all her questions to the background.

“Get it off, now!” she hissed at the blonde and made a beeline to her dresser, but a bellow from the kitchen downstairs stopped her dead in her tracks.

Shit, dad hasn't left yet!

“Sakura, dear, are you alright?”

She heard his heavy footsteps getting closer and rushed to the door like her life depended on it, yelling, “I'm doing my katas, dad, I'm fine!”

“Kizashi, let her be, you're running late! Suna caravan won't wait for you!” Mebuki chided him gently and Sakura's shoulders sagged in relief when his barking laughter grew distant.

“Bye, dad!” she hollered down the hall, turned back to the boys and slid down the door, hiding her face in her hands. “That was close...”

Naruto knew the mere idea of meeting at Sakura-chan’s house was doomed from the very beginning. He never really met her parents, but years of hate and scorn from civilians of Konoha taught him not to hope for a warm welcome. Still he accepted the invitation, too awed by the opportunity to take a peek at what home looks like. And then he fucked everything up.

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry!” he pleaded with his eyes wide and fists clenched around the crumpled jacket in his lap. It was stinky and greasy but Naruto desperately hoped the bucket of slop old hag Kisaragi
dumped at him hadn’t ruined his only winter coat completely. He wouldn’t have any money to spare on buying a new one until missions started and even then…

It was always a difficult choice between the food and other necessities for him. The damned Fox made his body recover nearly any damage, no matter how bad it was, but it couldn’t be done on chakra alone. Naruto was constantly on the run, either from someone who wanted to hurt him, or from the retribution for his pranks that were a retribution for hurting him. For that he needed more energy than the average twelve-year-old, which meant he had to eat more.

Easier said than done.

His wallet was empty for the most part of the month because his orphan’s allowance was only enough for bills and five big boxes of cup ramen that never lasted, no matter how hard he tried to save them for a rainy day. The last three or four days before he could collect the money, pay unrealistically high for a shithole he lived in bills and finally buy ramen, were filled with his belly growling loudly and dreams of food. Tomorrow his best shot could be a fruit stolen from the market.

It sucked, but Naruto did his best not to let anyone know. It would only make his tormentors happy in the end.

“Ugh, smells gross,” Sakura-chan scrunched her nose and fished the jacket from his hands before he could argue. She waved off his apologies and disappeared in the hallway only to return a moment later with her hand full of towels.

“I left it to soak in the bathroom, you can’t go train like you’ve been dunked in a dumpster,” she said matter of factly and, when he let out a protesting squeak, hurried to reassure him, “I’ll give it back to you in the evening, clean and whole, don’t worry. Here, take this while I find you something to throw on.”

She dropped a wet loofah in Naruto’s hands and held towels out to silent Sasuke who was staring at him like he’d grown a second head. When he didn’t react to her offering, the girl scowled and let the fabric fall in his lap.

“Sasuke, don’t stare,” she chastised and turned away to the dresser. He flinched at her reproach and stood up too, suddenly way too interested in the white patches on the wall.

Too late Naruto realized that without the cover of his jacket a thin mesh shirt did nothing to hide a huge seal spiraling around his navel like a goddamn snake. He clutched at the shirt desperately, a hot wave of anger rising in him like a tsunami, blinding him.

I didn’t ask for the Fox to be sealed in me! I never wanted it! he wanted to scream, but the words got all jumbled up in his throat. One thing was for Sakura-chan and Sasuke to simply know about it. It had been all words and words lie, but now they had seen the seal too. It made everything too real.

He felt suffocated.

“We’re nearly the same size so this one should fit.” A thoughtful voice got to Naruto through the cotton wool of his raging emotions and he jerked his head up only to find Sakura-chan’s green eyes, so rarely this soft, study him from under her long auburn lashes. “Need help with that?” she asked and pointed at the forgotten loofah in his hands with a careful expression.

“No need!” Naruto squeaked again as the beginnings of the blush crept up his ears and neck. He yanked his mesh off and began scrubbing at his skin vigorously, trying to be done as fast as possible.
When he was sure he was at least somewhat clean and his skin red but not with embarrassment anymore, he looked at his teammates again and chuckled nervously. “Gee, thanks, Sakura-chan. Wouldn’t be comfy to walk around like that all day, ‘ttebayo.”

Sasuke rolled his eyes and gave him a towel to dry off and Sakura threw a t-shirt at him with a smile. “You’re welcome,” she answered simply and left the room again to put all dirty stuff away.

Naruto stared after her, unsure if all this was just a dream. Maybe yesterday too.

Did he eat something funny and was now hallucinating like that time with mushrooms when he was five? That time he dreamt the lady from the orphanage came to take him home and let him stay, but when he woke up, he was completely alone in his too big for a lone kid apartment. Nobody was there to see him cry.

Would he come to nothing but empty room and no Sakura-chan and Sasuke-teme bickering in that new funny way where she snapped and he bit back but there was no real poison in their words? How would he go on again without her rare, unsure smiles and his silent understanding?

Naruto bit his lip till it split. He didn’t want this dream to end.

“What got you so riled up?” Sasuke asked, not even turning to look at him, but in the mirror Naruto could see his trademark scowl threatening to grow another scowl. He seemed angry.

Is it because I bumped into him? Or because he is stuck with me and Sakura-chan? Did I really dreamed everything up? Does he hate me? But why ask then?

The questions piled up in Naruto’s head, heavy like stones older kids in orphanage once tied to his feet before throwing him in the river. He couldn’t make his lungs work and felt like he was going to puke all at once when a familiar growl exploded in his mind, shaking him to the bone.

Stupid puny human kit, the Fox growled loudly, do not even try to suffocate yourself to death, I am not inclined to become a chakra impression scattered in the wind. Breathe.

“I’m not-” Naruto wheezed and bent, his vision blurry from the lack of air. He coughed, covering his mouth with both hands to muffle the sound, but it just made everything worse. “I don’t-”

Next thing he felt was a hand at his nape and another on his shoulder, holding him upright. The touch was cold and soothing to his sweaty skin, so rare but so real. It centered Naruto, grounded him in the moment and Fox’s ominous presence almost disappeared to the background of his mind.

“You’re not alone, you said it yourself,” Sasuke said slowly, as if Naruto was going to bolt any moment. “What brings this?”

Naruto stared at him blankly. How could he explain he wasn’t even sure Sasuke wasn’t his hallucination? Or genjutsu? What if Mizuki the traitor put him in an illusion and these last three days were just his twisted way to torture Naruto into believing he could have nice things only to rip them away from him?

The time ticked away but he couldn’t move or say anything. A tight spiral of panic once again began to unwind in his chest, threatening to pull him under completely.

“Idiot! Stop doing it to yourself!” Sasuke hissed and pushed him to sit on Sakura-chan’s bed. Naruto tried to duck, trembling, scared and unsure, and squeezed his eyes shut. He had no idea what would
happen next, but he was always ready to assume the worst. The blow, however, never came.

He cracked one eye open then and found Sasuke two steps away and pulling at his messy hair in frustration. “I’ve no idea how to deal with this,” the boy groaned, “where’s Haruno when she’s needed?”

Naruto choked on the air that was stuck in his throat. *Sasuke-teme would never say something like this,* the thought flashed in his mind and took roots. *He’d never admit needing Sakura-chan! This all is fake, why, WHY?*

Deep rumble of the Fox’s barking filled every part of his mind and Naruto collapsed on the floor, clawing on his ears.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Oh wow, thank you for your amazing feedback guys, really! I cannot even begin to explain how much it means to me.
A/N 2: This chapter is a short-ish one because it sort of became an intro to much longer 10th. It seemed relevant to do this part from Naruto's pov but in later chapters some of things will be explained from Sakura and Sasuke's pov as well.
A/N 3: This story grows like vine as is rooted deeply in my heart. Some things are just drafted and will only come into play much later, but if you want a sneak peak of characters that are going to join the cast in future, you can find their profiles on corresponding [pinterest boards](https://www.pinterest.com) that I am proud to share.
A/N 4: Also here is a link to [htgr playlist](https://www.youtube.com) that features all songs that in a way make their appearances through chapter names. Some hold a special meaning, some just kind of gave me the vibe and a line for a chapter name, but it's up to you to figure it out and interpret :)
A/N 5: Also, I somehow always forget to actually mention it, update days are Tuesday and Friday unless I'm on a writing spree and manage to finish more than two chapters a week ;)
If you have any questions regarding this story or would like to chat, drop by the comments, I'm always willing to talk yo you guys!

Much love, Kay <3

Coming next: Uzumaki blood is no water and even tailed beasts know better than to mess with Uzu women.
Sakura finally managed to remove the most persistent stains from Naruto’s coat when a faint thud of a body hitting something solid reached her ears. She cursed, vocalizing some of Inner’s less vulgar obscenities, and rushed back to her room. Water soaked orange jacket hit the tiles behind her back with a soft squelch.

*We left them for how long, five minutes?* Inner snarked as Sakura swung the bathroom door open, nearly tearing it off the hinges and darted out. *I bet on Sasuke snapping first!*~

*Shut it!* Sakura commanded voicelessly, almost teleporting into her bedroom. She had expected anything short of body count, but clearly not what she saw.

Naruto was lying on the floor trembling and his fingers were bloody. His usually tan, a couple shades darker than most Konoha residents’ skin was clammy and pale and there were scratch marks on his ears and cheeks, already half healed. He was struggling to breathe and, judging by the way mortified Sasuke tried to hold back Naruto’s hands, the damage was self-induced.

“Oh gods! What happened?” Sakura demanded and, when Sasuke said nothing to explain the scene, fell on her knees beside him.

*Second time in two days, we’re falling into a routine~*

The boy raised his dark, panicked eyes to look at her and whispered, “Damned if i know, Haruno. He’s been staring at nothing, then began asphyxiating. I tried to talk to him, but he wasn’t hearing me...”

Naruto jerked once more in his hands and a wave of heavy, oppressive chakra surged from his midsection in all directions. Hot and unyielding, it smothered Sakura and Sasuke, pressing them into the floor and threatening to leave burns. It was inhuman. It burnt

*The seal!* Inner suddenly howled, taking control of their body, *his seal should hold! Remind him!!*

“Naruto, please!” Sakura whispered, but choked on the words as the air was squeezed out of her lungs under this inmeasurable pressure. “Please, don’t do it to yourself!”
Sasuke’s hands felt like someone had set them on fire, but he refused to let go, even though the body in his hands was possessed by the demon that once destroyed the village. He couldn’t care less about Konoha right now.

In between the manipulative Council and lying bastards that didn’t even try to investigate what happened to his clan before simply sweeping it under the rug... Konoha did him no good, only lied in his face and stole everything his clan ever had until the name was all that’s left. Sasuke had no one.

He was absolutely alone in the house that wasn’t even his anymore. Council was so swift in singing the decree on redistribution of the lands, it had been done before Sasuke even left the hospital. What he came back to was rubble of burned down Uchiha quarters surrounding the last standing house - his parents’. The only reason they’d let him stay was to uphold the “generous” image of Hokage and, probably, bloodstains on the living room floor. It was a constant reminder of what had transpired in these walls, what had been done to once strong clan.

A wipeout.

Sasuke had no love for Konoha, but it was still useful. For four years vengeance had been the only thing he could think about. Killing that man became the goal he nurtured, the reason he got out of bed in the mornings and scrubbed and repolished the floor in the evenings. He had to remember and Konoha with its lies and stealing didn’t let him forget.

But somehow even this wretched village had managed to give birth to something good. Haruno barged into his life with Uzumaki in tow and she shook him until his eyes opened. He wasn’t the only one the village hurt even before they’ve become shinobi, its tools in war and peace. Yes, Sasuke had lost his clan and he was going to have his revenge for it, but he won’t be doing it without his teammates’ help. Sakura would probably kill him before he did as much as thought about running away and if she didn’t Naruto would drag him back on his stubbornness alone.

If Kyūbi won’t kill him first.

The demon woke up for some reason and was tearing Uzumaki apart, another orphan of the village that couldn’t care less about him. Sasuke at least knew his parents, even if he had lost them, Naruto’s father was a goddamn martyr who had died for Konoha and his son was prohibited from knowing. Sasuke knew peace and love before it had been stolen, Naruto saw only hate and still somehow had more good inside of him than most of the villagers.

He could simply let the beast free and have his revenge, see his tormentors die in flames. He dreamed to become their leader and protector instead.

Haruno clearly was the mind of this team, Sasuke was the skill, but Uzumaki... Noisy bastard had heart big enough for all three of them. Hence, Sakura was right, they could achieve more together, so even though his own chakra was on fire, Sasuke knew he couldn’t, wouldn’t let go.

He held on because he was so tired to be alone. Sasuke knew he was cursed, but hoped the luck would be in his favor just this once. If he was going to go down, he’d rather do it for the team than for the dead.

“Don’t give up, Naruto!” he growled and fought the pressure to reach out to screwed in pain face of the boy. His fingers brushed tenketsu on Naruto’s temple, sending sparks of agony through his body. Sakura reached for the one on the opposite side at the same time and they nodded to each other, ready to do something stupid.

Naruto bucked when their chakra bled into him and his eyes flew open, unseeing. Black met
cerulean blue. Pupils dilated and turned to red, a single inky tomoe spinning clockwise slowly. *Sharingan...* Sasuke thought with unnatural detachment and drowned.

He came to darkness. No, it wasn’t Haruno’s room anymore, there was water everywhere, stale and it stinked of sewers. Sasuke blinked once, twice and suddenly there was a roar all around him, in him, shaking his very bones.

“*How dare you try to control me, Uchiha! I will devour your flimsy soul!*”

Sasuke’s mouth snapped open to say something, even though he had not the slightest idea what. The darkness dispersed with a rush of vile, corrosive chakra and he found himself standing in front of a huge cavern. Its entrance was barred by stone pillars at least half a meter in diameter and there was a parchment clinging weakly to the middle bars. Sasuke could see the seal on it, complex, but somehow it didn’t feel complete. He had no idea why.

Then he saw it. An enormous red fox was baring its sharp teeth at him from its prison cell. Tails, not one, but nine were fanned out aggressively behind its back. Kyūbi no Kitsune, the Demon Fox.

“Five Stems, Ten Branches, working, but not solid,” Sakura’s voice came from his left and Sasuke flinched in shock.

Where was he, if not in Naruto’s mind? But how did he get there? And how Sakura got there? Where was Naruto himself? Did he...he saw sharingan, didn’t he. But there were only two Uchiha left alive and if it wasn’t *that man’s* trick then it could only mean…

“*Another puny human child...*” the Fox rumbled and suddenly slammed into the bars with so much force, the ground under Sasuke’s feet cracked. “*I will feast on your soul!*”

“Kurama-sama, please, there’s no need for such threats,” Sakura said politely and Sasuke stared at her as she made a beeline to the bars, seemingly not concerned by being so close to the being of pure destruction.

Maybe he had gone mad, because there actually were two Sakuras. One - wearing bright red dress and much brighter neon-green sash around her waist, short hair the color of spilled blood a mess - trotted along the divide and knocked on one of the pillars, testing its solidity. She was muttering something obscene while the other, clad in black t-shirt and pants like Sasuke remembered her, bowed respectfully to the demon before her.

“*Who are you, human kit?*” the beast grumbled, watching her suspiciously from above. It was at least seven meters tall, could be even higher, it was hard to tell in the dimness of the cavern where its crimson fur was the only source of light. “*Who gave you the right to call me that?*”

He seemed puzzled, Sasuke thought in surprise. But where was Naruto, damn it?!

“I apologize for my rudeness, Kurama-sama, my name is Haruno Sakura,” the monochrome Sakura answered, completely ignoring her bright counterpart’s curses and muttering, “I have seen your name in the journals of my aunt Kanasabi Rensa. And I know you do not eat souls.”

The beast suddenly flinched and shrunk in size a little. It fell on all four paws and in one fluid movement appeared at the very bars. Its muzzle, now not so big, squeezed in between them and it sniffed at Sakura.
“Uzumaki blood,” it hissed then bemusedly. “Idiot kit thinks he is the last one. What business do you have here?”

It was loud and everything shook with every word demonic Fox said, but it wasn't hostile to Sakura. Sasuke had no idea what was going on, but he prayed she knew what she was doing. She just nodded a fraction and held her palms open in a gesture of peace. “Naruto. You hurt him. You have to stop.”

The beast just slumped on his hind legs and howled. Its tails shook in the air with each gurgling sound that left its throat and… was it… laughing?

“I am a creature of chakra and nature, Haruno Sakura, the mirror of the world. What comes to me, I recreate and return. Look around and tell me what you see.”

Sewers, Sasuke thought immediately, rot and decline. It was no place for anyone to exist, even the demon. But why?

“Is it how Naruto perceives you, Kurama-sama?” Sakura asked as her eyes roamed the vast cave.

The Fox howled again and bared its teeth in what could be a semblance of a grin. “It is his body I am sealed in. It is his mind we share. He is full of hate and this hate I give back nine-fold. You, girl,” it pointed one sharp claw in Sakura’s direction “came in peace to seek knowledge so knowledge I share.”

It was so bullshit that Sasuke couldn't keep quiet anymore. He rushed to the monochrome Sakura and stood by her, fueled by anger, fear for Naruto and distrust.

“Naruto cannot hate to save his life, Fox!” he growled, dismissing what it said. “He is ours. He is in pain, stop it!” Not a moment too soon he was tackled by the bright Sakura who snarled at him threateningly to shut up, but it was already too late. The demon roared again and grew in size, taller than anything Sasuke ever saw.

“Uchiha! How dare you question my nature! It is your kind that that only brings suffering and death! I will devour you!” It stomped on the ground menacingly and its tails fanned out aggressively.

“Kurama-sama, please, stop!” Sakura pleaded while her other half was busy shoving Sasuke in the ribs until he couldn't do anything but wheeze in pain.

“Shut your fucking mouth, pretty stupid~” she raged above him wrathfully, “we need to save Naruto, not make Kyūbi angrier! If you can't keep it calm, shut it and let the Outer do the job~”

“The Outer?”

“Just shut it~” She punched him again and sat atop of his legs. She had a mean left hook and was a pain to look at. She was too… just too much. Color, emotion, uncontrollable power, was it what Sakura kept hidden all those years?

“He meant no harm,” another, his Sakura pleaded again, clutching at the stone of the bars in desperation as Kyūbi rampaged inside his cell. It growled at her words and its tails swung at the walls, striking fire.

“Uchihas are liars! They know no peace, they are a threat to the world, to my kin!”
“Sasuke just wants to help Naruto, Kurama-sama, it is all! If Naruto is suffering so strongly, we will help him and you won't have to harm him anymore.” Sakura - pale skin and black clothes with white circle on it, grey hair, discolored by the division of her self in two - put her hand on the crumbling paper of the seal and whispered surely, “You said I am of Uzumaki blood? Then I swear on my blood and chakra like women of Uzu had done before me, like my aunt and her shishō did, we come in peace. Naruto is ours, Sasuke didn't lie. He is our team. We mean him no harm.”

Her chakra bled into seal and the ink flared once before settling. The bright one jumped off Sasuke then, run to her other half and for a split moment they became one, making the seal flare once more. Kyūbi stared at them silently, as if he was weighing her words inside its head.

Sasuke pushed off the wet ground, slipped, but held his balance. What Haruno did was unthinkably stupid, he thought, but his legs moved on their own accord. One step, another… He was walking through the pain in his no doubt cracked ribs (imaginary? real?) and there was a faint shimmer in the periphery of his vision, the first sign of chakra exhaustion. He kept walking.

Was he still angry? Yes. Was he scared? Even more so. But what Haruno did wasn't just stupid, it was plain impossible. She'd done it anyway.

She had promised they would get stronger as a team and fulfill his goal. She planned Naruto's cramming sessions not just to make him a good shinobi, she was seriously ready to back him up in becoming a Hokage. She talked down the legendary demon that once destroyed Konoha. She was sure that this would help them get Naruto back? Well, Sasuke believed her. He’d follow her wherever she led.

His hand fell on top of hers on the seal and he felt something suck on his chakra. “I mean no harm, Kyūbi-s-sama,” he said, trying to be as polite as he could master, and it was true because Haruno said so and he trusted her. He wanted his team to be safe and strong.

“I don't believe you, Uchiha,” the Fox rumbled from above, but there was no danger in its voice this time. Just an echo of a hurricane far, far away. “But you, Haruno Sakura, remind me of my last host. You speak boldly. You have will to bend others’.”

“The kit's hate is buried deep. He fears the acceptance you showed him is a dream, a lie. Prove him wrong, teach him love and I will cause him no pain.”

“We will,” Sakura nodded and the Fox's tails moved faster than even Sasuke's eyes could track. It took a step back from the bars and pointed its muzzle somewhere in the darkness behind their backs. Both Sakuras rushed in the direction it showed without hesitation, but Sasuke continued to stare at the large beast.

“Take the kit back to your world then,” it said and turned away, trampling the ground under its large paws. When its huge form was almost invisible in the farthest corner of its cave, it spoke again. “You better not show your cursed eyes here anymore, Uchiha. The girl may not be with you next time and I will not hesitate. I will not be forced to abandon my host again nor will I suffer the death of him from the hands of the descendant of Uchiha Madara.”

Before Sasuke could scramble for an answer, there was a moan behind him and Sakuras’ troubled whispers. He ran to the sound then, putting off all thoughts of what Fox let on for later. His eyes were starting to sting and they had to get out of here as fast as it was possible.

He came to a halt before monochrome, Outer, holding Naruto's prone body in her hands. The other one was pacing, cursing under her breath as always. He had no idea how to make it work, how to
get back. He still wasn't sure he really had awakened his sharingan. It wasn't supposed to happen like this, was it?

But Naruto was unconscious and unusually pale - so wrong - in Sakura’s hands and she was looking at him expectantly. “Can you take us back?” she asked and even her voice sounded gray.

“What about her?” he jerked his head at the bright one.

“She's going wherever I go, Sasuke. We are one.” He watched them closer and then saw it: a thin opalescent thread hanging loosely between them, connecting their bodies. It glowed dimly the same violet light as the point on her forehead yesterday when she activated her Niki Isshin.

Sasuke nodded stiffly, kneeled beside them and asked, “Look me in the eyes.”

The world spun when he concentrated, wishing, ordering his eyes to let go, and they were back to Sakura's room, looming above Naruto’s body in a split second. Corrosive chakra faltered around them and a thin, pained whine came from Uzumaki. There was a flash of darkness in the red light that was streaming from his navel, then another. And another. Black spiral began pulsing steadily like a heartbeat, sucking the power worthy of a platoon of elite shinobi back into the confines of the body of a twelve-year-old boy.

Finally, Sasuke thought and rubbed at his tired eyes. The skin was hot and wet under his pulsing fingers.

Naruto blinked, returning into consciousness and to the sight of Sakura and Sasuke crying. Those weren’t ugly tears like when he was all alone in his unkempt apartment, curled in a ball around himself and wheezing at the pain in his throat, no. It was just water and salt and relief, because the moment he opened his eyes, they smiled at him.

“Naruto, you bastard!...” Sakura-chan whispered and caught him in a bone crushing hug. “Don’t you dare to scare us like that anymore!”

“She’d fight the demon to get you back, dobe,” he heard Sasuke say in the background and all of sudden he was pushed up into sitting position along with Sakura-chan still holding on him like her life depended on it. Then two more hands snaked around both of them and Sasuke let his forehead fall on Naruto’s shoulder. “The Fox said she’s just like your mom. Really didn’t like me though. I’m wounded.”

Naruto didn’t know what to say. He never really cared about how he sounded because people never cared to listen, but now it seemed very important to say the right thing. To ask the right thing. There were memories inside his head, floaty and strange, of two Sakuras and Sasuke speaking with him, giving him their chakra, making a promise. No, not him. The Fox!

“Is it all like... real?” he whispered hoarsely in the end.

“Of course it is,” they answered in unison, then Sakura ruffled his hair with a smile. “We’re a team, Naruto, and you’re a part of it. Sasuke may play it cool now, but he kind of broke his own limits trying to get to you.”

“And you talked the Demon Fox into complacency, Haruno,” Sasuke muttered, unable to hide his wonder and a soft blush at her praise. “How did you even knew?”

“My aunt left journals,” Naruto felt her shrug. “Kushina-sama sometimes brought her to meet him. I
know he is a Great Spirit and those aren’t inherently evil.”

“The mirror of the world?” Sasuke mused out loud.

“Yes. I know it doesn’t work like this, Naruto, but you cannot hate yourself for what you are. You need to stop, for both yours and Kurama-sama’s sake. We will be here to help you.” Sakura sounded so sure when she spoke… And Sasuke muttered his agreement in his shoulder.

Naruto felt his eyes start to prickle with tears too. He got himself so worked up about this because deep inside he was sure, he was just unworthy of good things. But Sasuke and Sakura-chan fought to get him back from the Fox and it was nice to Sakura-chan somehow. It knew his mother. It was… hating him because he hated himself? Naruto didn’t know what to think of it all, but he had never felt this happy in his whole live. This safe.

“You won’t even ask how it happened?” he whispered still, not fully believing his luck. There couldn’t be a single cloud in silver lining for sure.

“We’re not blind, dobe,” Sasuke smacked him on the shoulder gently before standing up, “We know that village treats you like shit and why. I don’t care for it. Judging by the plan Haruno smacked together in one night and the way she spoke to the Kyūbi, she also doesn’t. I wouldn’t tell her the names of your enemies if I were you though. She’s mad, just hides it well.”

“That’s a nice compliment, Sasuke, thank you~” Sakura singsonged and grasped his hand to stand up. He flinched at the unnatural cheeriness in her voice, but dutifully pulled her upright and held out his other hand for Naruto.

They all took some time to get their crumpled clothes in a semblance of the order and, when it became evident that the idea was doomed from the very beginning, Sakura quickly ran back to the bathroom to give both boys time to change into her spare t-shirts. Surprisingly, Sasuke fit in too, even if his eyes, thankfully black again, lingered on the clanless circle a bit too long. She finally hung Naruto’s jacket on the rack to dry and pulled on a fresh shirt and a customary red dress over it. Sensei’s words still rang clear in her head, “Whatever changes between you three, the less other people know, the safer you are.”

They’re gonna wear your clothes, smartypants, you think people won’t notice?~ Inner groaned in their shared mindscape.

Then I’m going to be three times as annoying so people only pay attention to me, Sakura frowned unhappily. She wasn’t going to like it one bit, but Sasuke was right, she’d do worse things for the team.

She left the bathroom and threw a quick look downstairs. The table in the kitchen was all set and the air smelt of fried rice and omelette. It was time to put her plan in action.

Back in her room, she measured both boys with an appraising look. They were still a little bit more disheveled than she would like, but it was already a half past seven and they had a team meeting at half past eight at the Training Ground Three. Sakura smiled nervously, hoping that if she somehow managed to prevent another Kyūbi disaster, a simple talk over food won’t kill her. Right?

“Presentable?” She clapped her hands and dragged her boys towards the door. “Okay, let’s go! The breakfast’s gonna go cold if we don’t hurry and mom hates reheating food.”
A/N: It always happens like this, I decide on a schedule, life fucks it up. This week was a menace and I'm running on 4 hours of sleep a day since Monday, but I can't really complain - my nights were well spent on reading some great ShikaSaku goodness. Still, right now I'm one chapter behind my plan. But don't you worry, htgr is written up to 16th chapter already, so I still have time to catch up while posting consistently!

A/N 2: In other news, you may find tags and pairings updated a bit thanks to Aisverse who nudged me in the right direction. Ain't gonna keep you in the dark no more, at least with not spoilery ones :D Also you can find boards for team seven members now with their short 'bios' and keyphrases here: Sakura, Naruto, Sasuke, Kakashi.

As always I'm really really grateful to every person who commented or left kudos, you are my sweet beans and I love you!

Much love, Kay <3

Coming next: Expect the unexpected, they say. Both Naruto and Sasuke should have known better than to think that Sakura had no surprises left in her sleeve.
mothers

Chapter Summary

Expect the unexpected, they say. Both Naruto and Sasuke should have known better than to think that Sakura had no surprises left in her sleeve.

Chapter Notes

The song for this chapter is **Mothers by Daughter**

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Sakura-chan, I can’t go there!” Naruto whispered in panic, trying to break free from her impossibly strong grasp. “Your parents will know! You’ll be in trouble!”

“Haruno, what the hell are you up to?” Sasuke echoed him, but Sakura paid their attempts to escape no mind and nearly shoved them down the stairs.

“Morning, mom!” she cheered exuberantly at the smiling bright-yellow-haired woman with green eyes as striking as Sakura’s that was standing in the middle of the open studio-type first floor of Haruno household. “Lemme introduce you to my team!”

Naruto just stood there slack-jawed. The lady before him was older, her hair wasn’t tied in a tight bun any longer and she wore a simple lime dress with a yellow apron over it instead of an orphanage nurse outfit. He actually thought he would never see her again and she was… Sakura-chan’s mom?

“Ibara-obasan?” he asked weakly, unsure of himself.

“Naruto-kun, Sasuke-kun, you’ve grown so much!” the woman smiled wildly and the next moment Naruto felt the air leave his lungs as he found himself in yet another bone-crushing hug. Sakura-chan really took after her mom in that department.

Naruto had never known his parents, but it didn’t mean he never dreamt of having someone to care about him. It was just that he had nothing besides his last name and wild imagination. It had to be enough.

The first memory he had was of someone big and soft smiling at him and telling him to be strong. It was a moment full of warmth, love and acceptance so profound, just remembering it could make him cry. Naruto held onto that feeling in the darkest days of his life. He knew that once there had been someone who loved him so much, but he also knew they left him alone all too soon. Why?

Sakura-chan and Kakashi-sensei had told him he was the son of the Fourth and the previous jinchūriki, Uzumaki Kushina, but it was hard to believe them. He never even heard of that woman, it was like she never existed at all! And people always said the Fourth was so cool and strong and they
all adored him, but if he really had been so strong, why did he die and leave Naruto alone? Why did
he seal the Kyūbi in his own son? And what happened to mom?

Naruto had so many questions that no one, not even Kakashi-sensei could answer. And basically
everyone, besides his own team maybe but it was still hard to believe too, hated Naruto because of
the Fox. Did they hate his mom too if she was like him? They probably did.

Orphanage kids treated him like dirt under their feet. Well, the younger ones were kind of okay at
first, but older ones who lost their parents after Kyūbi attack were always angry and didn’t hesitate to
beat the crap out of him. Most of the nurses just turned a blind eye on it at best, some were angry too
and always told him what a bad boy he was and how he didn’t deserve living. They had never said
why.

But there was that one lady, the daughter of Orphanage Director that wasn’t nearly as nasty to him.
She wasn’t too nice, mind you, but brash and loud, and it made other kids be wary of her. But not
Naruto. And, in hindsight, it was a very smart trick.

Ibara-obasan would spook the youngest with sheer volume of her voice and when the playroom
cleared she let him play with some of the toys other kids didn’t like in the corner. She told him stories
about shinobi, strong and brave, who protected the village and the village loved them in return. It
made him want to become one too. She also taught him how to read and write kana and some kanji
during naptimes because he just couldn't lie still for so long and she once brought him fruit for his
birthday even though everyone else was especially rude to him on 10th of October.

And then Director Ibara died and nurses became even meaner and Ibara-obasan stopped coming. A
week after that Naruto was thrown out of the orphanage and was trying to fall asleep in a small,
completely barren room of his shabby apartment in red-light district. He spent seven years there,
clinging to the memory of a single moment of unconditional love from his parents, trying to become
someone who the village won’t hate and failing again and again.

But the words Ibara-obasan told him before leaving never left his head. “No matter how hard life is,
Naruto-kun, you have to keep on trying,” she said with a sad smile the day before he saw her for the
last time. “Be strong and I will always be proud of you, ’dattebane!’” And strong he was, even if no
one was there to see it.

Sakura stared at her mom in confusion. When they had spoken about her new team the night prior,
Mebuki nearly ordered her to bring them in for a breakfast and Sakura didn’t have it in herself to
disagree. She feared, however, that mom won’t be polite to Naruto. She had prohibited Sakura to
speak with him herself years ago in the end.

But when mom nearly sprinted to hug the boys like she’d known them, when Naruto called her by
grandpa’s last name… Sakura finally began to understand why she had spent most of her pre-
Academy childhood with dad while mom was always away. She also had an inkling of
understanding of why she so suddenly left the Orphanage and opened up her shop after grandpa
died. The new director must have prohibited her from coming.

Sasuke had no idea what was happening. Well, he kind of gathered the youngest Haruno was a ti-i-
iny little bit unhinged, but it turned out crazy was a family trait. Why was this woman so happy to
see him? Surely she didn’t meet all customers of her spice shop this way?
“Oh, you probably have a meeting with your sensei soon! Hurry and eat up,” the strange lady laughed loudly and finally let him and Naruto go. Sasuke didn’t think he would ever love breathing so much as in that moment.

“Mom, please, you’re scaring them!” Haruno squeaked behind his back, clearly embarrassed, but he already was once again dragged across the room. What’s wrong with these women?!

In a blink of an eye Sasuke found himself in the kitchen part of the house, seated at the table with a bowl full of fried rice before him. Naruto, still dazed, was squirming on his right and Sakura, pink just like her hair, was sitting across the table in front of him. Sakura’s mom placed a huge pot smelling of curry in the middle of the table and joined them, taking place on Sakura’s left.

“Ibara-obasan?” Naruto tried again weakly, but she shushed him with a wide smile.

“What’s wrong with these women?!” In a blink of an eye Sasuke found himself in the kitchen part of the house, seated at the table with a bowl full of fried rice before him. Naruto, still dazed, was squirming on his right and Sakura, pink just like her hair, was sitting across the table in front of him. Sakura’s mom placed a huge pot smelling of curry in the middle of the table and joined them, taking place on Sakura’s left.

“Not for the last fourteen years and you can call me Mebuki, Naruto-kun. Kansō-tōsan had been an Orphanage Director long before I was born and I practically grew up there too, so everybody kept using his last name for me even after I married Kizashi.” There was a moment of stunned silence and then she clapped her hands joyfully, “Now eat, dattebane!”

Sakura’s mom not only was as out of her head like Sakura, she was vibrant just like Naruto and used almost the same filler word as dobe! What was going on here?! Unable to deal with it any longer, he cleared his throat and asked as politely as he could when his mind was reeling, “Mebuki-san… are you and Naruto by any chance related?”

She turned to him, head cocked to the left and her bright eyes narrowed. Suddenly he wasn’t so sure of it anymore. Sasuke felt like he was thrown into a very strong genjutsu and struggling for air, but Sakura’s mom was no shinobi. She was just scary.

“I’m not a sensor-type, mom, but I don’t think so,” his teammate replied with a puzzled expression, watching the older Haruno with her brows raised.

“Good,” Mebuki-san nodded and returned to her seat with a photo album in her hands. The moment passed as if it never happened and she became that joyful welcoming lady again.

“Sakura, have they been followed?” she asked suddenly, all business, and went to close the curtains over the kitchen window.

“As for your question, Sasuke-kun, the answer would be both yes and no. I knew Naruto-kun’s mother very well. My mama brought her to Konoha when she was four, we lived together in tōsan’s Orphanage. Kushina was already training to be shinobi, but me… My body was too weak, so I stayed to work in the orphanage. When Naruto-kun had been brought there, I held onto the position for as long as I could.”

Mebuki-san looked over to Naruto, who’d been listening raptly, hanging onto her every word. Sasuke couldn’t even begin to imagine how it felt, to never know his mother and finally learn something from a person who claimed to be a friend of her at freaking twelve. Why hadn’t she said something earlier?

“The decree, his mind came an answer automatically. She probably kept her silence to keep her family safe. Mebuki-san wasn’t a kunoichi herself, but she sure knew how shinobi world worked.

“I also knew you mother, Sasuke-kun,” she said all of sudden and Sasuke felt a heavy weight settle at the pit of his stomach. “When we were pregnant with you lot,” Mebuki continued, “I, Mikoto and Kushina hoped so much one day you kids will be friends…”
She shook her head wistfully, forcing the memories off, and placed the album on the table. It looked old and was dusty, but when she opened its last page, dust didn’t matter anymore. He stared at the full picture of the scrape that his mom had carried with her till her very death. It was only her and newborn Sasuke on the scrape, but in the album…

There were three women standing in front of the Ichiraku ramen shop, a blonde one - Sakura’s mom - on the right with a chubby all pink toddler in her hands, his mom with bundled up Sasuke on the left and a olive-skinned, heavily pregnant woman with long crimson hair in the middle. She was hugging the others with a sunny smile on her lips that looked just like Naruto’s. The three of them seemed so… happy?

“Mom, you’ve never told…” Sakura whispered, reaching out to touch the photograph gingerly. “Why now?”

“Well, I probably should have waited for a safer opportunity, Sa-chan,” the woman laughed nervously and rubbed her neck in another all familiar gesture. “But I saw them and I just knew… I couldn’t keep it in me anymore, ttebane!”

“Ibara...Mebuki-obasan,” Naruto quickly righted himself and circled the table to stand before her, “What was mom like? Did she… did she want to have me? How did she deal with the Fox? How people treated her? Why did they…?”

He rattled the questions out, stumbling over words and forgetting to breathe, nervously, but with so much hope that Sasuke felt uncomfortable. He surely saw Naruto in even more personal situations, but something deep inside told him, the moment he was witnessing would make or break him completely.

“I am sorry, Naruto-kun, but I cannot give you all the answers,” Mebuki-san said and Naruto flinched as if she hit him. She saw it too and swiftly pulled him in another hug. “Not because I don’t want to, but some things I just don’t know and some… are to dangerous to speak of. But what I’m absolutely sure of,” she sat back in her chair and looked at him very seriously, “I know she loved you very much. She couldn’t stop dreaming of how she would teach you all the Uzumaki specialties, how she and Minato-kun would watch you grow up and do everything in their power to be with you. And I know that they did their best, Naruto. They had an utmost faith in you, that’s why…”

The clock on the kitchenette screeched in alarm and all four winced at the awfully loud sound. It was eight a.m. Sasuke noticed. They would have to run to get to the Training Ground Three in time.

Mebuki-san must have known it too, because she let Naruto go and wiped her wet cheeks. Naruto did the same, sniffling loudly, but no one here was going to call him out on that. When the older woman stood to put the album away, Sasuke knew he and Naruto both stared at it longingly, but they really were on a tight schedule. And still hungry, he thought unhappily.

Sakura’s mom seemed to read his mind. In three minutes time she and Sakura somehow managed to pack four bento from their untouched breakfast and, just before they were off running, Mebuki-san placed a folded piece of paper in Sakura’s hand. “Give this to your sensei, Sa-chan.”

Then she opened her her arms in invitation and Sasuke found himself compelled to give in. He didn’t know how much he craved human touch until his teammates got him exposed to it. Now he couldn’t really care to fight it.

When all three of them got enveloped in Mebuki-san’s warm arms and the smell of curry and cinnamon that seemed etched into her skin, she softly said, “Kizashi is an open-minded man, but I’d better break the news to him gently. Very conveniently, he left for the Land of Rivers today and isn’t
due back in some weeks, so we will have enough time to talk, kids. Come by for dinner today and bring your sensei with you. With him in here, I will be able to tell you more.”

Sasuke, Naruto and Sakura murmured their thanks and rushed up the stairs into Sakura’s room to leave the house through her window.

If there was a spring in Sasuke’s step as he run through the streets of Konoha side by side with his teammates, he was sure no one would pay attention because one simply couldn’t ignore Haruno’s loud wails about ‘her precious Sasuke-kun’ and painful to the eyes red dress. Gods bless human obliviousness, because after just a day of the exposure to her true self, he couldn’t believe how fake it really sounded.

“Do you think they would be proud of us?” Naruto asked him all of sudden, not winded in the slightest even though they ran at Sakura’s top speed.

Sasuke looked at the blonde boy. He was more laid back than usual, quieter. It wasn’t like him even if served right to their disguise. Sasuke wasn’t sure he liked it. So, even though it grated him to speak of his family, he snorted and told him with a smirk, “We’re gonna become the damn best team in this village, dobe, of course our mothers would be proud.” Because he knew, his mom would be, so Naruto’s had to be too.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So, let the deviation from canon begin full force! All I can tell you for now is more info on Uzumaki business will be either in chapter 16 or 17, depending on how my writers block will behave this week.

A/N 2: That said, unfortunately I'm not exactly in my happy place rn and it probably shows in the mood of last couple of chapters. I'm trying to deal with that and I promise the story will continue even if I have to pull a couple of all-nighters. I hope recent additions to tags and pairings didn't spook you all, but if they did, well... That's just how this story goes.

Thank you everyone who read and commented, your words mean the world to me.

Much love, Kay

Coming next: Kakashi might not be the best candidate for a teaching position and he knows it well. So he seeks advise from someone he can trust with this

| reviews are good for author's old soul |
Chapter Summary

Kakashi might not be the best candidate for a teaching position and he knows it well. So he seeks advise from someone he can trust with this.

Chapter Notes

The song for this chapter is Mr. Brightside by The Killers

Konoha never slept. It was the fate of every shinobi village - to always be on high alert but never let it show.

While civilians - a nice facade, Konoha’s skin and smiling face - slept peacefully in their beds, unaware of deals and kills made in the dark, shinobi - its flesh and bone, sinew and blood - went about their business. Cards were dealt in the Jōnin Standby Station, wounds were opened in T&I Department of Intelligence Division, birds were pet in Konoha Aviary before message scrolls left to its recipients.

Night crept through the village, caressing the roofs with the moonlight. Eastern wind whispered gentle lullabies into open windows. Tree branches creaked under the feet of men and women in animal masks rushing to hospital wards. Stone of Hokage Rock stood unmoved by the darkness that nested inside it, emotionless, corrupted.

A lone man sat cross-legged in front of the rectangular boulder etched with names of the people who gave their lives for the village. He spoke in a voice low and unhurried and as words fell from his lips, a small seal distorted them into a cheery whistling because he knew better than anyone, Konoha never slept.

“...you always said I'm shitty at being a kid, Obito, and while you were right, I never thought something was lacking from my life. At least I wasn't so one-track minded as the foreign girl. Remember her? Red hair, head in the scrolls, only cared about her seals and Kushina?”

“Well, were she alive, she'd be an aunt now. Can you believe it? Kanasabi - someone's aunt! I bet she'd never notice. But, to be honest, Sakura's an okay kid.”

“I'm sure, you'd fall in love with her in an instant, Rin. She's a fighter just like Kushina, but instead of the Kyūbi in her head, there's a personality split. Imagine, one of the Academy instructors plain mindraped a seven-year-old and the office simply swept it under the rug. Civilian kid, who’d care? They hadn't changed a fraction.”

“And you, Obito, would probably have a blast with Naruto and Sasuke. They had a rocky start, but
the girl managed to beat some sense in them. She's a fierce one.”

“Hey, don't blame me, it's not favoritism! It's just one is an Uchiha, sharingan, cool moves, yada-yada - everything you hated, and the other one is an Uzumaki. If you'd seen those reserves, Obito… The office already has plans for them, but the girl… Okay, there's a little bit of favoritism. Rin, don't laugh at me! She's just a good shinobi material, that's all. Wants to become a sealmaster, can you believe it? Hell, what I wouldn't give…”

Kakashi sighed and tore his eye from the memorial stone to watch the sun rise. He had to leave early today if he wanted to catch Gai before he disappeared into the morning for his usual hundred laps around the village madness.

The man stretched and patted the stone lightly in apology, finding the names of his fallen comrades in seemingly endless string of shinobi that had died during their service for the village. Uchiha Obito. Nohara Rin. Namikaze Minato. There was no Kushina's name here, in the eyes of the Third she didn't deserve the place on the stone, probably.

Maybe one day Naruto would really become a Hokage and add her name here. Maybe it will be Sakura.

Kakashi shook his head, pushing these far-fetched thoughts away.

“Sorry, guys, I hate to break the routine, but I really need Gai's advice. I have no idea how to deal with kids and something tells me ANBU methods won't work well on these three. I'll tell you how it went tomorrow.”

He bowed to the cenotaph curtly before disappearing in a puff of smoke.

When his chakra faded from the lawn before the memorial stone, a single barely visible barrier seal scribbled on its base flickered and died out until Kakashi's next visit. The mask made it impossible to read his lips, but he was paranoid enough to make sure no one could hear his morning monologues.

You don't live up to twenty six in shinobi world if you are too careless not to keep your thoughts to yourself. And maybe the dead, at least until someone came up with a resurrection technique.

“Gai, what a surprise to find you here,” Kakashi intoned flatly, gracefully letting himself in unannounced through an open kitchen window. It wasn't technically unannounced when he said something, was it?

Gai, bless his big untamed heart, took no offence at Kakashi's intrusion. What he did instead was jump in an attempt to tackle the jōnin in a bear hug with an ear unfriendly “Good morning, Rival!” Unsuccessfully as always, but it didn't lessen his joviality in the slightest.

“What brought you here on such a Pleasant Morning?” the green-clad man asked with his trademark radiant smile when he landed on his feet after trading some playful blows with Kakashi. “Are you here to join me for a morning workout? What a Youthful Idea! Let us have a contest then!”

Before Gai could talk him into another session of backwards running through the Forest of Death (okay, that was a fun one and Kakashi still had a trophy leg of a giant centipede sealed in a storage scroll somewhere in his apartment), newly appointed sensei of Team Seven perched onto a barstool by Gai's old bar table with a bone-rattling sigh. He stretched with flourish until something popped at the base of his skull and dropped a small scroll on top of the somewhat splintered by kunai surface. It rolled out on its own, already charged with Kakashi's chakra and a sound negating barrier sparked into existence.
The moment Gai saw the shimmering dome settle, his blows knit together in a worried expression. He quietly entered the barrier and sat on the second stool across his rival.

“Kakashi, what happened?”

The man shifted uncomfortably, peering at the taijutsu master with a lone heavy-lidded gray eye. His tone was absolutely serious and left no room for chit-chat when he spoke, “Gai… I need your help.”

Maito Gai had been acquainted with Hatake Kakashi for the most part of his life and never before he heard his Rival talk like this. Kakashi was the man who could order, propose, bargain, advise, but never plead. He was above asking even though he knew there rarely was something Gai would deny him. Surely, help was not on that list.

“Tell me what bothers you, Kakashi, and I will do my best to support you in any way I can!” he declared, slamming his palms on the table expectantly. “And if I fail, I will do three, no, four hundred one-handed push-ups!”

That brought him no response, but a semblance of a smile sneaked into the corner of his Rival’s eye. Surely whatever the problem was, it was not very dire. But still it managed to worry Kakashi enough to ask for help and that, in turn, worried Gai.

“Uh.. You see, starting from yesterday morning I supervise new Team Seven,” the man in front of him mumbled into his mask. He ruffled his unruly mane of gray hair nervously, not looking up. The words slammed into Gai’s eardrums with the power of a pained howl when in reality they were not more than a whisper. Team Seven was where the greatest Konoha shinobi came from, as well as the greatest traitors. Nobody dared to admit it to its rare living and sane ex-members, but the whole village knew, Team Seven was cursed.

There was no way, however, for Gai to tell Kakashi this. It was his generation of the team that bore such an unlucky number that ended up caught up in the crossfire of the Third Shinobi War. Hatake Kakashi wasn’t just Konoha’s Copy Nin, he was also the last living member of once unbreakable clan and the sole survivor of the last Team Seven. So many titles for a twenty six year old man, they weighed him down when no one was looking.

Gai watched his friend carefully, trying to decipher how Kakashi himself was treating his new assignment. It was always hard to read him though. “It is an honorable task to teach a new generation of shinobi, Rival,” he said in the end.

“I shit you not. Look at them.” A low chuckle startled Gai and with unhidden fascination he accepted a photograph in a simple birch frame.

It was… not what he expected to see.

Faintly smiling girl, all bright colors, stood in the middle with her hands lying comfortably on the waists of two boys, disheveled Uchiha heir and somewhat ruffled Uzumaki boy. They both were turned to the camera and pointing at their headbands, but the photo forever caught them casting side glances at their female teammate while she threw her head back slightly to watch her jōnin sensei. And there was Kakashi, looking down at the trio with a warm crinkling smile evident on his masked face. One of his hands clad in fingerless glove was on girl’s shoulder, another was raised as if to adjust the headband covering the sharingan.

It was not a photo Gai braced himself to see. There was life in it, smiles barely hidden and unity. It
was completely different from the one Kakashi kept on the windowsill of his room. His Team Seven never had a chance to become… this.

“Good,” he said in the end. “They look...Team Seven looks good.”

“Yeah,” his Rival answered absently, talking the picture back and sealing it into yet another scroll. “And that’s why I want to make sure I don’t fuck them up.”

As Gai listened to Kakashi’s rendition of his first team meeting, gray-haired jōnin saw the frown on his usually cheerful face deepen even further.

Gai had always been an open book with every emotion written on his broad face, but he was also the man Kakashi trusted almost implicitly. It was just that the man was too bright, too caring for his own good to see any fault in what current office was doing to the village, so even if something in Kakashi yearned to tell him about his budding plan, he knew better than that. He would keep the details like Sakura's condition secret not only for team's sake, but for Gai's own. Plausible deniability was going to become Kakashi's new motto instead of questionable morality soon, it seemed.

So Kakashi talked about Sakura's nearly non-existent stamina rather than her split mind, Naruto's inability to focus instead of his easy way with words, Sasuke's emotional constipation rather than his by the book training. In the end he broke into to Gai’s apartment to seek advice on how to deal with their weakest sides, not to boast about their achievements or bemoan their traumas.

Gai was the friend Kakashi came to accept not the least because of his legendary stubbornness and inability to give up. And now he wanted to… honestly, he had no idea what he wanted. Maybe to understand how the man managed to uphold such a stellar (if a bit specific) record with less than perfect kids on his own team. Maybe to be told that he won't end up with charred remains and mutilated corpses or nothing at all but dust scattered in the burning wind in a couple years time.

What he knew with absolute certainty? Kakashi wanted to get ridiculously drunk and pass out before he started overthinking and yesterday's thoughts of murder surfaced up again. In the village with a decent T&I letting his killer intent free was equal to some very unpleasant meetings. In a village where a nosy Yamanaka could stick into your head until there were only legs dangling outside (metaphorically of course), complacency, even put up as a well crafted facade, could save lots of lives.

Kakashi loved his adrenaline shot a day, but he wasn't in ANBU anymore: ‘kill now, explain later’ policy did not apply to wet behind the ears pups. So he finished his list of woes and stared at Gai with rapt attention burning in his eye.

“How can I teach them to survive without killing them in the process?”

“I am truly glad, my Rival, that you came to me!” Gai striked a pose from his sitting position and smiled blindingly. He really couldn't begin to understand why Kakashi was so nervous.

Of course, years of ANBU service had done him no good, making already traumatized man slip even deeper into the role of an unthinking tool of the village, but he was sure it could be dealt with. Kakashi knew his own shortcomings and seemed ready to change, his previous admission made it clear as day.

“You worry about your little genin, but their Times of Youth only begin to bloom. They only need
careful guidance and support! And to be led by example, but you, my hip and cool Rival, is an exemplary shinobi yourself!"

Gai didn't miss how Kakashi's visible part of the face cringed. Sure he was thinking about his dead teammates, but what Gai actually meant was his ANBU record. Spec ops usually kept their names well hidden, but Hatake Kakashi was a legend among them and the teams he had led proved to be most efficient if Jōnin Standby Station rumor mill was to be trusted. And even if it wasn't, Bingo Book page on Kakashi was enough to state loud and clear: given right directions, his new team will become a very strong asset to Konoha soon.

So Gai reached out to grab two cups from a nearby shelf, poured some tea in both and put one in front of his brooding friend. He turned away then to watch sun creep over the treeline slowly, giving Kakashi time to sip lukewarm liquid openly, without his mask. They both trusted each other enough for Gai not to look, and Kakashi not to rush.

“If you want your young lady and gentlemen to train and learn well with all their youthful vigor,” Gai continued at length, drumming his fingers on a glazed clay of the cup, “first of all, you need to make sure they are healthy and well fed. Help them establish a regimen, I think both Uzumaki boy and clanless kunoichi will benefit from it greatly as my precious students Tenten and Lee did.”

“And then comes the easiest part: training hard.” Gai struck his favorite ‘nice guy’ pose without turning and nodded in satisfaction at the bright reflection of his smile in the window pane. The sun had practically rose and he was already falling behind his usual schedule, but it was a very rare occasion since Kakashi sought him out himself, so the jōnin just silently made a vow to add another fifty laps to his evening run.

“I don’t know, Gai,” the man sighed, tugging his mask back on and slumping onto the bar table in an intangible heap with a messy mop of gray hair on top. “They are twelve and it’s a very different twelve from how we’ve been. They need to be taught so much... and I have no desire to run them into the ground.”

When people cursed Kakashi for being a self-centered and arrogant bastard, Gai couldn’t help but laugh. Sure, man’s attitude was infuriating more often than not, but every shinobi wore some kind of a mask. His Rival just had more layers that shielded him from the world because in truth? He was just one big open festering wound.

Gai stood up to take empty cups to the sink and clasped Kakashi’s shoulder in passing. “Just help them stand up again when they fall and commend their achievements, however small they may seem to a seasoned fighter like you. You can do it, my friend. You won’t fail.”

Chapter End Notes

Coming next: The first day of training goes on and Sakura finds out something she’s very happy to hear.

A/N: Do I love this chapter? Yes I do. Was it a menace to write? Sure it was. More at eleven
A/N 2: But really, I’m falling behind my schedule in a most ridiculous way. The amount of work and pre-new year rush are here to rob me of all my free time, so I’m writing almost on autopilot now. But your reviews make me plot harder and do better. Point is? Please, review! Talk to me! Tell me who you would like to see in next chapters? Do
you want to see other teams? Jonin? Civilians? Who is your favorite character of the series?
Also writing Gai is pure torture but I think I managed rather well *looks away whistling nervously*
Comments are life and at this point I'm not below begging ahaha :D
Chapter Summary

The first day of training goes on and Sakura finds out something she's very happy to hear.

Chapter Notes

The song for this chapter is **Shakedown by The Score**

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

With 'giving positive feedback' in mind Kakashi touched down on the outskirts of the Training Ground Three and a quick glance at the sun made him notice with surprise that he was only late by half an hour. He already was on his best behavior, really.

His kids were there too and their appearances made Kakashi raise a brow in surprise. The trio seemed to be in the middle of warm up exercises.

Naruto was doing crunches and counting under his breath, “ninety-one, ninety-two, ninety-three…” He was without his usual obnoxious orange jacket and for some unknown reason wore a black t-shirt with white 'clanless' circle on its back instead. Bright pants were still there though. Same went for Sasuke, who was behind by three crunches, but his movements were less jerky and more efficient.

Sakura in yesterday's annoyingly red dress over black knee-length pants was sprawled on the ground next to the boys. Her fingers were playing with the tip of her loose braid and there was a scroll in her lap, but instead of training or studying she was cheering brightly for 'her Sasuke-kun to show how it's really done' in that high-pitched and whiny voice of hers that Kakashi came to associate with her fangirl persona. But, most interestingly, she was a clone.

He swept the clearing and nearby bushes with a closer look, letting his senses spread, and immediately registered another presence just five meters away. A thin trickle of spiky, angry chakra led him onto the branch above another well hidden clearing where his last student was stuck in a plank, sweating profusely. Kakashi was willing to bet that the hissing sounds barely reaching his ears were some crafty expletives.

“Aren't you getting a little ahead of yourself, Sakura-chan?” he asked with a smile, jumping down to join the girl.

“Thirty… seconds… more,” she ground out in response, cutting the curses off immediately, but not moving to stand up. Kakashi hummed his agreement and let his back rest on the bark of the tree as he watched her struggle another half of the minute.

Her hands were shaking from the strain and the tip of her pink braid was getting closer and closer to touching the grass, but the girl didn't budge. Every time her elbows threatened to give in, her chakra flashed aggressively and Sakura held on. Kakashi was fascinated by the way her split mind operated
her body and dealt with the strain. *It would certainly come in handy later on,* he mused as the girl finally collapsed on the grass, gasping.

“How long?” The man squatted beside her prone form, wondering whether he should help her turn over or leave as she was.

“Four thirty,” Sakura groaned into the ground and rolled over, pushing her body upright. “The boys are still going? I broke on thirty first…”

Kakashi chuckled under his mask and patted her head joyfully. “Don’t worry, Sakura-chan, you will get there and soon,” his voice dropped threateningly, “or else…”

“I got it, sensei, I got it!” she sighed and dusted off her crumpled dress. “I just don’t know how I can train and play *that* role at the same time…”

They both looked at the clearing where Sasuke and Naruto started going through katas, accompanied by clone-Sakura's exalted shrieks. That was a problem Kakashi could solve with ease.

“You won't have to, Sakura-chan. Let's go,” he commanded and puffed away.

Sakura thought her bones would melt as she scrambled for a handseal to disperse the clone and stumbled out in the open to join the boys. They were waiting for her already, dusty too, but not drenched with sweat and absolutely not as tired as she was.

*From a simple warm up!* Inner bellowed, incensed as usual, *How do you plan to catch up with them?~*

*Oi, shut up!*

*And who’s channeling Naruto now?~*


She trudged forward and came to a halt between Sasuke and Naruto, who both eyed her warily. It was humiliating to be weak like this, to suddenly find herself so behind them in every physical aspect. In all honesty, Sakura felt compelled to curl in a ball and die right here. Thankfully, Kakashi-sensei chose that moment to act.

He slammed his hands on the ground and a web of seals lunged in all directions from the interaction point. It darted under Sakura’s feet, making her feel electric for a second, and launched further away until seven pillars of condensed earth rose up, tearing the grass some thirty meters away from sensei and every twenty from each other.

“Whoa, so cool!” Naruto exclaimed, bouncing in his place with excitement. “What's that for, sensei?”

“It is a genjutsu strengthening barrier that won't let anyone see what happens on the inside,” the man explained, making some more handseals in rapid succession and muttering the name of the technique so softly, Sakura only heard ‘kyūmenkyō’. *Spherical mirror?*

“You have permission to act freely now.”

Sasuke immediately got Naruto in the headlock and began lecturing the blonde on how rushing
through exercises ruined the technique. The boy yelped, struggling, and a moment later they were a heap of limbs rolling on the ground. Sakura smiled and let them be. They did a good show of being exemplary rude to each other before Kakashi-sensei arrived and, in her opinion, deserved some unwinding as long as they worked their differences out in a non-death threatening way.

The first thing she did was tug that damn red dress off her overheated body. Then she threw it on the ground, righted her identical to boys’ t-shirt under sensei’s surprised eye and dug a scroll out of her pouch. She offered it to him silently, waiting for a command to report, but the jōnin waved her off with a short, “Rest,” already engrossed in her plan.

Pray we didn’t fuck it up, long face!~ Inner chirped and Sakura threw herself into the fray just to get away from her noisy subconsciousness.

As if it ever helped...

She was busy holding Sasuke back while he tried to claw his way out of her grip and rush after cackling Naruto, who managed to use some twisted paper bomb to shower them both in glitter, when Kakashi-sensei’s sharp “Ahem!” threw Sakura off balance. She let Sasuke go, automatically standing at attention, but the boy got caught by momentum and had to twist awkwardly in the air to land on his feet on her right. Naruto appeared in a flash on her left a second later, safely hidden by her body from Sasuke's wrath and casting sly smiles at him.

Sensei watched them with unreadable expression for a full minute, then finally nodded to Sakura, returning her the scroll.

“For the most part I agree with the plan,” he said thoughtfully rubbing his chin. “Although I have questions about the last point.” His brow shot up expectantly and Sakura willed down a nervous gulp. Everything had already been set in motion and she really had no time to change the arrangements.

“Please take this,” she fished the note her mom had given her out of her pouch and offered it to sensei. The man opened it swiftly and after a brief moment of reading looked back at Sakura.

“Is your mother okay with it?” Doubt was quite evident in his voice.

Our moms were friends. Naruto is family~., Inner muttered and Sakura felt her resolve strengthening again. She saw how he and Sasuke stared at that photo in the album.

She noticed how mom, the woman that had barely been there for her almost until Sakura entered the Academy, yearned to learn something about Naruto through her daughter. How she smiled when Sakura chatted about Sasuke and his achievements. How she reached out for the boys immediately where Sakura worked so hard to get her smile and recognition by besting every discipline she could. For a brief moment it felt like mom cared for them more.

A spark of jealousy bloomed in Sakura's chest at that thought, but she quelled it down and pushed to Inner to deal with. It was idiotic. Naruto and Sasuke were both starved of love when she had both parents to come home to. She could share.

Sakura pursed her lips and looked at Kakashi-sensei seriously. “My mom is ecstatic that she can help. She spent years teaching kids in orphanage and then in her spare time. She offered it herself.”

The man measured her, fidgety Naruto and ramrod straight Sasuke with a speculative glance and in one fluid motion sank to the ground. “Explain,” he ordered with a sigh and so Sakura did. From the
very yesterday evening when she came home and told mom about her team.

Every time Kakashi thought the girl won't be able to surprise him even more, she proved him wrong. How she managed to pen down an elaborated supplementary education plan for Naruto, he could understand, systematization clearly was her strong suit. But how on earth did she end up talking to a demon? And, did Kakashi get it right, making a deal with the creature?

But it was Sasuke who shed some light on the shady situation. He got all twitchy when Sakura got to the actual ‘getting into the seal part’, like he desperately needed to hold onto something. Something ended up to be girl's right hand.

“Sensei, in the Bingo Book you're named Sharingan-no Kakashi. Is it true?” young prodigy asked hoarsely, not looking him in the eye.

“And why the interest all of sudden, Sasuke-kun?” he responded with a question of his own. Something told Kakashi he wasn't going to like it.

Sasuke gripped Sakura's hand tighter, Naruto made a beeline to where he stood and nearly latched onto him too. “It was my fault, Kakashi-sensei,” the blonde boy whispered as if waiting to be hit or yelled at. “I panicked and the Fox pulled me in, it called itself a 'mirror of the world' or something that's why it's so angry…” Desperate blue eyes burnt holes in Kakashi's as the boy pleaded, “It's angry because I... I am. It's my fault! Sasuke didn't do anything wrong, really! He and Sakura-chan talked to the Fox and it calmed down, I won't let it happen again, I promise! I won't let it out!”

*What the hell,* Kakashi groaned inwardly, absolutely at loss. He thought he caught a whiff of what happened, but it was impossible! Two genin couldn't just barge into the seal and get all chatty with the demon!

Before he could make any more assumptions, Sasuke suddenly let his teammates go, took a step forward and said calmly, “Sensei, we needed to get Naruto out and my sharingan activated this morning. You seem to be the only person in this village with first-hand experience with my clan's dōjutsu. Can you teach me how to control it?”

“Oh shit,” Kakashi swore before he could stop himself. It explained 'getting into the seal' part. It also meant Sasuke just got a big target mark on his spine, just where his clan symbol usually was sewn on a blue fabric with bright red thread.

It all went downhill from here.

There was a lot of talking. Like a lot™. Kakashi felt like he went on for hours, trying to explain to his hotheads the very idea of danger and risk and why they should have ran to him immediately instead of diving into unknown.

The kids looked properly chastised by the end, but he still saw that mulish certainty of doing the right thing in Sasuke's thankfully still black eyes. Sakura was chewing on the inside of her cheek and there were shadows dancing in the depth of her green stare. She was probably arguing with her mental counterpart. How did she call her, Inner?

Naruto didn't look up once, probably absolutely mortified and ready to be thrown back into Academy if Kakashi understood his thinking process right. And it turned out this train of thought could put the boy (and the whole village by proxy) in a quite precarious position. Maybe it was time
to follow Gai's advice.

“I hope you understand the ramifications that could have followed your brash decision,” he said grimly.

The trio in front of him shuffled closer to each other and nodded. They were properly dressed down already and Kakashi deemed it enough of stick. It was time for carrots.

“So…” he waited out for the last nerve-wracking moment and then smiled, clapping his hands, “It was a good example of teamwork. I’m proud of the way you stood up for your comrade.”

A soft whine and Sakura's ‘thank gods’ drowned in Naruto's loud sigh of relief. Kakashi chuckled lightly and with another, more sadistic smile listed the regimen they were to uphold from now on. They proved twice they were going to be a good team and now he was finally ready to take them seriously.

“... physical exercises in the morning, your personalized schedules are in the scrolls I will give you later. Sakura, be ready, your life is going to become a world of pain.”

The girl nodded, rubbing her forearms, and Naruto patted her shoulder with a grin, “We'll help you, Sakura-chan!”

“You'll need help yourself, dobe,” Sasuke muttered, squinting at the rambunctious blonde. “You have no chill.”

“You have enough for three of us, ‘ttebayo!” Naruto retorted with a grin, then turned to Sakura again and tapped her forehead lightly where she and Sasuke did when her technique was active. “Or is it four? Does she count?”

“She's thankful for your thoughtfulness, Naruto,” Sakura swatted his hand away lightly with a nervous laugh, “but please don't interrupt sensei. Okay?”

“Uh-huh,” Kakashi couldn't help but chuckle again at their antics. “I haven't met Sakura's Inner in person, Naruto, but something tells me there is not enough 'chill' in Sasuke to quell down that particular tornado.” He winked to mildly horrified kunoichi and continued to dictate Team Seven's new regimen.

“After lunch break Sakura takes over for tutoring session, I and Sasuke work on his sharingan. Kunai/shuriken practice for Sakura and Naruto after that, Sasuke and I supervise. Then survival practice. Ninjutsu, genjutsu, weapons, fighting styles - I'll show you a bit of everything so you can try and choose what suits you - you can go all out. Next week we start doing D-ranks and I will show you some basic seals, but you can already start reading on them in your free time. Questions?”

But there were none, only shocked silence. *I too did my planning, pups,* Kakashi thought, reaching into his vest pocket. It was a moment that would decide future formation of the team.

“Do you know what this is?” Kakashi-sensei asked, showing them three white pieces of thick paper. They were cut in squares with the side of six cm and had a barely visible shimmer around the edges.

“Chakra paper…” Sakura and Inner whispered at once, barely managing to contain an honest, not posed squeal. *We are going to learn our elemental affinities! Shannarō!*~

She repeated Inner's words out loud to explain Naruto what was going to happen because how could
he know about such expensive thing as chakra paper? Of course he didn't.

“And how do you use it? Sakura-chan, please show us.” Kakashi-sensei gave her a slip and she felt her palms growing wet, not from her elemental affinity of course, but from nervous agitation that suddenly settled in the pit of her stomach.

“One pushes a bit of chakra into the paper and depending on the reaction we can tell what element this particular shinobi can use most easily,” she explained in a slightly shaky voice. It was more for Naruto, but Sakura noticed Sasuke too listened to her attentively. “If it burns, then the person has a fire affinity as many shinobi in the Fire Country do. If it crumbles, then the person is a doton user. Ripped apart - fūton, becomes wet - suiton, charged with electricity - raiton.”

“Well, you know the theory, Sakura-chan,” Kakashi-sensei smiled at her approvingly (or at least she decided it was an approval). “Now do it.”

Sakura placed the paper on the tips of middle and index fingers of left hand and closed her eyes. She tried to feel her chakra flowing through her body along the veins and arteries, thrumming steady through her tenketsu. Inner reached out for her, drifting closer to the surface, and together they pulled a thin thread of their life force away from its usual course and pushed it into the paper.

“Whoa!” Naruto gasped as something soft and warm spread onto Sakura's fingers.

“Congratulations, Sakura,” sensei said officially and her eyes snapped open at his serious tone. She stared in wonder at the patches of slightly wet soil on her skin as he went on, “A pretty strong doton with an inkling of suiton. Steady, dedicated, but ready to adapt, it suits you well.”

“Earth and water,” Sakura whispered in awe, “just like aunt Rensa…”

“Wanna go next?” Sasuke asked his blonde teammate who still couldn't tear his dazed blue eyes from the muddy earth on Haruno's fingers. Like she'd shown him a magic trick. “Dobe?”

“What?!?” Naruto snapped out of his awed state and shook his head like a dog that's got out of the water.

“Your turn,” Sasuke repeated and pushed the idiotic blonde towards Kakashi-sensei and two remaining papers. He was sure he had katon as every Uchiha before him, so his little revelation could wait another five minutes. Let him have his moment of fame.

But Naruto seemed to get second thoughts about it all of sudden. “No, you can go first,” he practically yelled, jumping away from the sheets of paper. “I can wait, it's no big deal!”

“Naruto, it's not gonna hurt you,” Sakura finally got back to reality too and wiped her hand on the grass before reaching out for Uzumaki’s shoulder. “It's your chakra and paper, nothing more!”

Five eyes stared at him expectantly, but he didn’t seem to budge. “I’ll be the last, okay?”

“But why?”

“Remember my clone at the exam?”

Sakura’s brows furrowed in concentration. “It was unstable, yes. But you have shadow clones now.” She shrugged and placed her hands on her hips with an exasperated sigh. “Naruto, what’s wrong?”
The boy scrunched his nose and poked at his seal hidden under the t-shirt. “I can’t do ‘little chakra’ because I have mine and Fox’s. *Kage bunshin* takes a lot, so I just let it run free, sorta. But I can’t control it the way you do, guys, ‘ttebayo.” He started pacing the clearing, muttering to himself, “What if I have katon? The thing will explode in our faces! Or raiton? I stuck my fingers in electric socket once, that hu-u-urts. I don’t wanna hurt anyone.”

Sasuke suppressed a groan when Naruto suddenly stopped midstep, turned on his heel and pointed at him, then at Sakura. “I don’t wanna hurt you!”

“I think you are forgetting something,” Kakashi-sensei said suddenly.

Strange enough, he rarely stopped them when they veered off the topic. The jōnin just let them go on on their own for some time, quietly observing their natural dynamics. *Trying to figure us out*, Sasuke thought, *like we’re a strange puzzle*.

“You aren’t doing it unsupervised, Naruto,” the man reminded, “here’s me, your jōnin-commander, watching over you. Like it had to be in the morning.” There was the reproaching tone again and, uh, it made Sasuke want to hit something.

“But-”

“No buts,” the man commanded before Naruto began arguing again and three genin automatically snapped at attention. He surely knew how to make even simplest of phrases sound like orders. “I will not let anything *dire* happen to the team.”

*Dire.* Sasuke huffed, conceding to the point. *So he won’t let us die, but some good electric shock or a getting singed is okay. A test of reaction? Fine by me.*

Naruto froze mid-sentence with his mouth open, clearly out of arguments too. Then something must have clicked in that filled with pranks and fluffy demons, *gods forgive me for my sins*, head of his and he reached out for the paper cautiously. Sensei placed one on his open palm and nodded in encouragement.

“Here goes nothing,” Uzumaki whispered and… nothing happened.

Sakura had always paid attention in Academy and a chapter on Uzushio was filled with so much contradicting information that she couldn’t help but try to get her hands on everything on the ruined village that Konoha Library was able provide. She knew Uzu had its own big clans that were widely famous for fūinjutsu, water and wind mastery. And Naruto was an Uzumaki, for gods’ sake, of course he had to have suiton!

She stared intently at the white square in Naruto’s hands, waiting for it to sag with water. Her heart pounding furiously, still high on the adrenaline of her own revelation and nervous for Naruto at the same moment. Time seemed to stretch impossibly long, but nothing changed and paper remained just that - paper.

*He’s holding back!*~ Inner shouted in their shared mindscape suddenly, so loud that Sakura’s eardrums hurt in reality.

*What?* she asked in confusion. *How do you know?*

*Look at him, long face! He’s so high-strung he won’t be able to even cast a henge! He doesn’t believe Kaka-sensei can protect us.*~
And what am I supposed to do about it? Sakura bit back furiously. Whack him like you would?

Inner grimaced and sent her an image of them both holding onto Naruto’s prone body lying in murky waters of his seal. You want to go there and have a chat with the Kyūbi again? If your answer is no, DO SOMETHING for fuck’s sake! Naruto may not trust this man, but you got him out! He trusts you!~

Even cringing from the shrill voice of her annoying part, Sakura couldn’t really argue. She knew about Kakashi-sensei from Kushina-sama and Rensa-obasan’s journals, they were basically one-sidedly acquainted. But Naruto (and Sasuke to be fair) only saw him for the first time yesterday. He was a jōnin of Leaf, true, but the life taught all three of them not to trust easily. There was reason behind Inner’s colorful yells after all as it was behind her existence.

“Naruto, come on. We’re not made of glass, do it!” Sakura said seriously, making the boy look at her. He pursed his lips firmly, an expression that didn’t fit his usually exuberant persona, but finally nodded.

The blast wave threw her off her feet and into the air a heartbeat later.

The barrier held, which was a small miracle in itself. The part of Training Ground Three inside it… not very much so.

At least five D-ranks or one Tenzō to fix it, Kakashi noted absently, leaping up in the air to catch his students from falling into slippery crater filled with debris of uprooted trees and crushed stone. They had no water-walking training yet so the chances of safe landing were slim and Kakashi couldn’t afford trips to hospital now. Too much to do.

He caught ruffled and wet but unharmed Sasuke and Sakura before they hit the ground and dropped them on a relatively solid patch of earth in front of wide-eyed Naruto with an eye-crinkling smile.

“Strong wind with a close second of water, good. You blew it up just like your mother once said she had done on her first try.”

Boy’s face immediately lost that haunted, almost helpless look at this simple reassurance and he whooped, punching the air with his fist. Sakura scrambled to stay on her feet when a loudly cheering tornado crashed into her with “We both have suiton, Sakura-chan!”, but Sasuke helped her to stay upright, shaking his head. “And you were so fast, sensei! It was so cool, ’ttebayo! Will you teach us that too?” A miniature copy of Kushina with Minato-sensei’s face bounced in his place, worries already forgotten. His attention span was as bad as hers, but now it played in Kakashi’s favor.

Ten points to Gai for his advice, he exhaled, letting the tension he didn’t know had settled in his chest go. There was a long road ahead of them before they learnt to work together seamlessly like a well-oiled machine. Honestly, he had no idea what would he do if Sakura hadn’t taken the lead and accepted his authority as seamlessly as she had done - like she knew him and trusted him not for his rank, but…

Journals, he frowned under his mask. I wonder what the new girl put there that made her ‘niece’ believe in me so implicitly? But there was time for doing and there was time for thinking. The latter had to wait until Kakashi was back home with more information.

Sasuke’s chakra paper went down in flames as both he and Kakashi had expected. He took in a
satisfied smile finally blooming on usually blank-faced Uchiha’s lips (or rather pokerface wannabe because he still had a long road ahead and his teammates would probably have none of it) and Naruto’s shocked eyes when Sakura suddenly reached out for Sasuke’s hand. Her rosewood colored brows were furrowed in concentration as she traced the scorch line on boy’s index finger.

“Sensei, that’s not a katon burn,” she murmured and Kakashi once again wondered how the office managed to miss this gem. Well, bad for them and good for Team Seven.

“You’re right, Sakura-chan. That’s how lightning affinity manifests.”

He really got lucky and got a full house. Three highly motivated kids with bonds growing stronger with every moment and all five elemental affinities at their disposal. Asuma with his old same Ino-Shika-Cho and Kurenai with her clan brats can suck on it! Kakashi thought gleefully.

“Of no, I’ve been told this generation of the famous Konoha trio can’t get on at all! But at least they’re not a hopeless case like yours, Hatake!” Asuma had the audacity to mock Kakashi’s luck the whole evening they spent at the Crooked Kunai after the teams had been assigned to them.

Three hours long brag session. While Kakashi simply wanted to get ridiculously drunk and stop thinking about Team Seven Curse.

Nope, Asuma hasn’t changed one bit in the seven years in Twelve Guardians squad. Still a cheeky smoking moron.

“I would rather wait another year than have that in my team. A lost cause, clearly,” Hyūga Gentō, another jōnin-sensei candidate scoffed into his sake.

He was a tokubetsu jōnin specialized on tracking (what else would Hyūga do?) and not really powerful at that, the rumor mill went. But the man had connections and seemed to be very opinionated, loudly pro-office even. Kakashi tried to keep as far away from likes of his as possible. Maybe he was just allergic to ass-licking bastards who’d do anything Council says.

“He’s just envious, taichō, don’t mind him. I think you’d do justice to any team.” Gentō’s twin sister Enka flopped onto the stool on Kakashi’s right, all Hyūga grace and absolutely not Hyūga-like talk. She and her brother were two sides of the same coin, brats of a snotty clan, but where he carried the stick up his ass with pride, Enka did her best to stay as far away from the compound as possible.

Kakashi laughed silently when she, completely at ease without her usual Koi ANBU mask, whispered conspiratorially in his ear, “If your new litter turns out to be too much of a trouble, you know who to call to clean the mess, taichō. I and Cat are at your disposal.”

She took her sake and left in the direction of inebriated Anko to join the rest of her friends after that. Kakashi followed the sway of her hips as she crossed crowded bar and nearly straddled Mitarashi at the booth. Enka was wild and crafty, a woman holding a surprising for Hyūga fierceness in her. She also had a great ass.

He shook his head to get rid of the unwelcome thoughts and laughed mirthlessly in his sake. He had too much this evening. Maybe he just needed to get laid to get the pent-up aggression out of his system, but he would never do that with Koi, no matter how inviting her curves were out of confines of ANBU gear. She used to be his subordinate just yesterday and he was unwilling to blur that line,
especially with the person he held in high esteem.

He also knew Anko would castrate him for hitting on her girlfriend.

So he stayed in his place, nursing another fill of sake and watching Enka join a drinking contest with her friends. Two T&I jōnin, three chūnin, and two tokubetsu including Mitarashi hollered and whistled, but other than that they treated Enka like equal, completely ignoring hateful looks her brother was sending their way, and Kakashi felt pride at that.

When she had been appointed to his ANBU unit, she was seventeen, unexpectedly talkative for a branch house brat and willing to cram as many missions as he would let her only to stay away from Hyūga compound. The girl was good at their dirty business, but something in the way she pushed her body constantly to exceed her abilities and mindlessly threw herself at every danger and woman in the vicinity told Kakashi she hadn’t been in a happy place even prior ANBU (how a Hyūga got into his ‘suicide squad’ he had no idea). Then he caught her hiding nosebleed on her return from the compound.

It took him a couple of weeks to figure out what was the source of her strange behavior after that. Hyūga were secretive but Kakashi was one of the best even on the territory inhabited by shinobi with 360 degree x-ray vision. He snooped around the compound in his free time, observing both main and branch house members treat his new addition to the team with derision, not bothering to hide their discontent as she smiled openly where they kept their faces sour, told jokes that fell flat, spoke her mind, unwilling to bend to the Elders’ orders. She paid for it in a way he couldn’t even fully comprehend.

Hyūga Enka was called a disgrace to the clan for fighting being wedded to her father’s cousin and was tortured to near death through her cursed seal when she, still seventeen and way too young for that tried to flee the ceremony. Still she didn’t bend. Not until she broke free and got to ANBU headquarters.

Kakashi knew clan politics were full of shit, but now, watching the woman he dragged out of the noose three years ago grin salaciously at her partner before finishing another bottle of sake in one go, he still had a hard time believing something like ‘caged bird’ seal was silently approved by the office and the Third. It was not just a dirty trick, it was slavery and when slaves resisted main branch’s whims…

The only reason he hadn’t gone after Hiashi that day was because if he had, the girl would just die before Mantis and Dove arrived to heal her. And then he was too busy helping Rabbit hold Mitarashi back from doing something very brash and stupid.

Hound’s ANBU team was openly called ‘suicide squad’ because black mission scrolls they were given meant failure was not an option, it was a death sentence. In the space of seven years Kakashi had been squad leader, fifteen bodies of its members were discharged into Konoha’s morgue for autopsy with self-inflicted wounds, eight more stayed burnt or buried in the forests of Fire Country, damaged by certain self-destructive techniques. The body count was something of dark spot on squad’s reputation, but the grim reality was… Hound’s ANBU team had never failed a mission.

Hyūga Enka survived that day. And the day after. And another. It was not the first time the seal had been used on her and not the last, but she never bent. Hidden behind Koi mask of hers or not, she stood proud by her squad and friends and her village. Kakashi taught her some questionable things, as he was sure Mantis and Rabbit did and it gave her enough footing to survive and keep fighting. Her and Anko’s long-lasting affair was yet another ‘fuck you’ thrown in the faces of Hyūga clan that
finally got her banished from compound first and cast out of the clan a year ago.

Enka had been so proud when she told him about it, how the only thing that tied her to the clan now was a name and a seal that will destroy her eyes upon her death. It had been said with such ease, acceptance of sorts, that Kakashi once again thought of treason. The girl was his subordinate, but she also became pack and the idea shook him at the time so he buried it somewhere deep to never explore. It was too dangerous.

Enka moved in with Anko (the wall between his and their apartment turned out to be too thin for his liking after that and he had to bribe his way into their lair to put up some sound cancelling seals) and signed a contract with ninneko (Mantis’ partner dog Kanmaru took it personally and the landlady banned them both from the building). Enka made herself quite a name for her ability to get rid of the bodies and it made Kakashi irrationally proud because she took his Death from the Underground technique and made something completely new from it. She kept away from her clan but with the same intensity kept antagonizing her brother though, even if Kakashi never understood the reason for their mutual animosity.

Kakashi was broken out of his musings when the stool on his right creaked again under Kurenai’s uncoordinated drunk body. “I’m so sorry you have to deal with these kids, Kakashi, they are so unadjusted,” she slurred into his ear, her sake breath warm on his skin.

"Same to you, Kurenai-chan, same to you." Their cups clinked and Kakashi took a swig of his alcohol, silently pondering how late he will be for the first meeting with his team because of his future head-splitting hungover. Hopefully late enough for them to give up and leave.

Two days ago he had agreed with Kurenai and drank to it, silently planning the way he would get rid of the fangirl. And maybe even take Enka on her word - there were perks in having the Gravedigger in his squad. Koi was eerily gleeful when it came to making corpses go away and as Dove’s lover she had no choice but to be good at cover up. Anko loved her business messy.

Today, in the middle of a ruined training ground only years of ANBU were stopping Kakashi from cackling maniacally.

The unfairness of the world! While Asuma would have to struggle making young Nara genius simply move his ass and deal with constantly overstimulated Yamanaka; while Kurenai would have to put a leash on a completely off the rails Inuzuka and probably perform a dark ritual to get some fighting spirit into Hyūga heiress…

Kakashi got a team that was created to be dysfunctional, but his kids got on like a house on fire. Not literally, thankfully, at least not until Naruto or Sakura pushed Sasuke’s buttons too much. He really needed to teach them some water ninjutsu and soon.

All elements in one team sounded cool, Sakura decided. It was relatively rare, though not unheard of, but the possibilities… They were nearly endless now. How many techniques could they master together! How strong they could become! Naruto was in total agreement with her thoughts and wasn’t afraid to show it and even Sasuke couldn’t contain a small smile. They just got one step closer
to achieving their goals.

A strange dissonant sound tore Sakura out of her daydreaming and she shivered. Like claws grating the glass, it made the hair at her nape and forearms stand on ends. It felt dark, malicious even. She turned slowly to the source of hypnotic sound, already knowing what she'll see.

It came from under the black mask of a man that told her not to let her hair down. The same man that seemed ready to kill when she had opened up about her ‘stolen’ technique. The fabric hid the face, but did nothing to obscure the outline of the lips crooked in a grin. Terrifying.

Oh gods, he’s so intimidating!~ Inner squealed, reminding Sakura who was the unhinged one in this partnership and effectively breaking the spell. She cleared her suddenly dry throat and was ready to turn away, but a steely gray eye caught her attention.

The man was looking at them and he knew she saw it. He caught her staring at him staring at them dangerously, a judge ready to pass the sentence, and Sakura’s breath hitched. Did he find what he was looking for?

The mask moved, erasing the outlandish grin and ANBU captain morphed back into Kakashi-sensei in a heartbeat. The crinkles hugged his eye in a warm smile as he asked lightly, “Is something wrong, Sakura-chan?”

“Isn’t it?” she crowed, cocking her head to the right as if trying to shake the illusion off. “I’m sorry, sensei, I got a little carried away. What are we doing now?”

Kakashi pushed mortification down his throat. How come he became so relaxed with these three in the span of two days that he let his mask slip? Worst of all, he wasn’t even sure which one was a mask anymore. He certainly needed time and space to figure himself out before the visit to Haruno household.

The girl was polite and smart enough to let his carelessness slide, but he knew, everything had a price. She kept offering him information freely in these past two days and it was just a question of time before she started asking. Kakashi had to decide how much he was willing to share in return.

He looked at the sun, then at the ruined part of the training ground and bit the inside of his cheek. They all could use some mindless exercise.

“Two laps around the village, lunch break and some survival training. Off we go!”

The air shimmered and three bickering genin rushed towards the village edge followed by a grey-haired man with his eyes trained on a bright orange pocket book. The girl was a mess, all dirty and barely keeping up with brooding Uchiha. Demon-boy was loud and excessive as always, trying to get some of her attention, but only receiving weak punches instead. Team Seven was operating according to the plan.

Fourteen was ready to deem putting Hatake off ANBU duty to watch the two a waste of resources, but the ruin of the Training Ground Three caught his attention. Danzō-sama turned out to be right, of course. Demon-boy needed containment. Hatake would serve this role for now.

The man clad in usual ANBU garb adjusted his spotless mask and disappeared from the shadow of the big oak tree in the direction of the Hokage Mountain. Not once he questioned how the demolition
of the area took place without his notice.

Kakashi felt his clone disperse and let a small grin curl on his lips. *Kyūmenkyō no sakkaku* genjutsu did its job and Root member assigned to watch Naruto's chakra flares didn't even notice the crater and debris that had appeared out of nowhere. They were off the hook for some time and Kakashi had a chance to tune his plans to match his kids' needs.

Mantis had always said Kakashi was too soft and couldn't pass by a stray. First Cat, then Koi, now these three... Maybe Inuzuka was right.

The only question that nagged at him was how the hell no one found out about the morning incident? The boy was under surveillance and yet his venture to Sakura's house seemed to go unnoticed. She also said Naruto had been bleeding Kyuubi's chakra, but Root agent apparently missed that part too. What had really happened at Haruno household and how did three wet behind the ears genin manage to cover it up?

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Actually, this chapter was two until I looked at the wordcount and decided to slam them together. Why? Because I can. And because I feel generous today. Also because I couldn't find a proper name for the first part lol :D Not that it makes my life easier - I'm so behind my schedule now :'

Guess where the one ended and another started and I'll throw a cameo of a character of your choice in the chapter I'm writing right now!

A/N 2: Kakashi's squad! I love them so much! They have doggo! Go ahead and look at 'em biscuits and tell me what you think! Hatake Kakashi/Hound, Mitarashi Anko/Dove, Hyūga Enka/Koi, Tenzō/Cat, Aburame Yanagi/Rabbit, Inuzuka Tenrō&Kanmaru/Mantis

A/N 3: Your feedback makes me a happy, teary eyed mess, don't stop! Love ya all lots, Kay <3

Coming next: Kakashi hunts, Sakura learns, Naruto jokes and Sasuke is exasperated.

Also, here's Enka's portrait done by me - [click!](#)
Tenrō's portrait done by me - [click!](#)
“Come on, suckers, let's go-go-go!”

Overly joyful yell echoed through the thick forest canopy clinging to the inside of the Konoha Wall sector where it passed by the Training Ground Zero. The shrill sound resonated off the Wall, spooked a flock of small plum-feathered birds into flight and died down somewhere in the distance barred by a rusty chain-link fence.

Sakura's hands twitched in response. She made an aborted motion to grab a kunai, nearly slipped and swore silently before continuing creeping up the hundred-year-old oak trunk, her body now plastered to the mossy bark. It was much harder than she had thought in the beginning, but she refused to let go. She needed a clear view to cast a genjutsu.

Another Naruto's cry turned into a shriek and a soft poof of smoke rose above the bushes in the south-southwest from her position. Now they only had fifteen clones left. White cloud appeared southwest. Fourteen.

I'm going to go crazy if we don't do something, long face! Come on, move your sorry ass up here and try that technique out!~

Shut it, Sakura snapped at Inner, pushing at their connection. If you can't be useful, at least don't distract me.

Fine, you sullen bitch, I'll be silent~

Fine yourself, moron.

Knowing she had the final word, Sakura grinned sharply and grabbed the base of a broken branch on her right. The bark she was slithering up was covered in knots and scars where shinobi tools left their marks over the years. They were everywhere, letting her climb and use them as leverages, but slippery moss made it one hell of a journey.

“Oh no, Kaka-sensei that's not fai-”

One more bang, southeast and much closer this time, threw Sakura off balance and the knot under her left foot gave in. Thirteen, she counted automatically as gravity, the unforgiving bitch, dragged her down the trunk, leaving scratches, grazes and bruises on her unprotected skin, and threw her
body towards the ground.

_Fuck you, fucking idiot, hold onto something!_~ Inner screeched as Sakura scrambled to catch a twig, a hollow, just anything to break her fall like her life depended on it. Didn't it?

Her fingers and knees were burning from countless splinters piercing her skin as she fought to find her footing again but the ground grew closer and closer with every moment. All she could do was brace for impact and hope to survive the collision. And then the world spun wildly.

She was still falling, but it felt unreal in a way only life-threatening situations ever did, like a dream that Sakura was watching from the sidelines. Her body bent, obeying the command that wasn't her own, and when her spine only by some millimeters avoided crashing into another thick branch some five meters above the ground, Inner howled, _Aren't you shinobi, shannarō! Use your chakra!_~

Sakura blinked, overcome with the sense of vertigo, choking on the air in the place where there was no air and felt Inner pushing her life force into her feet and palms in one last panicked attempt to save herself. The ground swung forward to meet her and suddenly…

Everything froze for a split moment. Chakra, shaky under Inner's control, enveloped Sakura's feet and glued her to a thick branch three meters above the ground.

Shocked, she tried to balance her body, but momentum took its toll on it and Sakura fell forward, still clinging to the branch for her dear life. It groaned under her weight, but held and Sakura found herself hanging upside down and staring into wide red with black tomoe swirling madly eyes right in front of her.

Another bang went on in the east.

_Twelve~, Inner counted and tiredly retreated back into their shared mindscape.

Sakura's chakra pulsed, adjusting the current, and the girl tumbled down with a huge chunk of oak bark still latched onto soles of her boots. Right into strong, warmer than average human arms.

“Are you an angel, Sakura-chan?” Naruto's voice reached her ears through cotton wool of nausea and drowned in Inner's howling laughter.

Sasuke stared at the gangly shadow of Haruno scaling the old oak in agitation. Of course she needed damned highest tree in vicinity for her experiment, not like they were already on timer! Still, he kept lying low in the nearby bushes, ready to defend their position should Naruto's clones run out before she reached the destination point and cast her genjutsu.

Give or take, the plan, no matter how reckless, was working this far.

When sensei led them here, his voice heavy with the joyful promise of suffering (Sasuke still had no idea how this man managed to be so chirpy and menacing at once), they had expected sparrings, not ‘hide and seek’. Or rather ‘hunter and prey’.

Kakashi-sensei had brought up another barrier, this one much bigger than on Training Ground Three, and told them to use anything at their disposal to ‘survive’ next three hours before flipping his book open. In hindsight, Sasuke had never been so grateful for a head start.

Sakura swept both him and Naruto in the direction of nearby bushes almost immediately and he could swear he saw the gears in her head turning as she went through their options with that Inner
part of hers. Sasuke quickly came to recognize that particular gleam in her eyes and twist to her lips and ‘danger alarm’ went off in his mind every time that one spoke up, voice so sweet that Sakura’s teeth should have gotten rotten long ago. And, more importantly, he knew better than argue with her.

“We need a distraction and a base of operations,” she whispered, dragging both boys through the thorny undergrowth. “Sensei said he won’t use sharingan, so we have an advantage here, but only if we play it smart. I’ve read about an area genjutsu that can alter our chakra signatures, we could try to set it up.”

“Alter how?” Sasuke hissed, dodging a sharp twig that Haruno pushed away from her path, “Dobe has enough chakra for a platoon of shinobi in him!”

“Hey, it’s not my fault!” the boy in question muttered stiffly before cartwheeling forward to trample the way for Sakura, who got thorns in her messy bun and was furiously trying to free her hair.

Sasuke quickly helped her to untangle the wreck that her pink locks became and pushed her to move, waving off her thanks. “So? You and I could pass for animals, small deer or something like that. How do we hide him?”

They took a sharp turn to the west, getting away from the fence of the actual Training Ground Zero. Naruto ducked under a fallen tree and suddenly spun to face his teammates, nearly making Sakura run over him. Sasuke squinted at the dobe dangerously and got a brightest smile in return.

“Spill,” Sakura ordered, taking the pause in running to level her breathing.

“Mushrooms,” the blonde exclaimed victoriously in a stage whisper.

“What?” Both Sasuke and Sakura were staring at him blankly.

“Mushrooms!” he repeated, the beginnings of the doubt clear in his voice. “Ichiraku-jisan once said mushrooms have hu-u-uge roots and one ‘shroom root can be larger than whole village?” By the time he finished the phrase it turned into question.

Sasuke wanted to bang his head on the nearest tree. Sure, Naruto wasn’t the brightest kid of the generation, but the way his brains seemed to work was absolutely unpredictable and it was brilliant. How could people call him dumb?

“Naruto, you’re a genius!” Haruno wheezed and grabbed them by their wrists again. “Massive mycelium colony… Boys, I need the biggest and oldest tree in the area!”

It didn’t take them long to find a tree in a forest: the oak they chose was so big, its branches spread wider than the biggest street of Konoha. They were actually standing just another twenty meters away from it.

Trying to leave the intertwinnings of hazelnut and something Sasuke couldn’t even begin to identify, boys attempted to cover their tracks while Sakura made a beeline to the tree itself. Its shadow was perfect for moss growth and thick green carpet silenced her steps as she moved. Encircled by bushes from every side except for the hole where the trio entered, small clearing in front of the oak was just what they needed.

“I’ll have to scale at least to twelve meters height, then feel the presence I need to change, alter it in my mind and pull it into the jutsu,” Haruno muttered, inspecting the bark cautiously and Sasuke let her be, opting for making sure he could track comings and goings in the nearby part of the forest instead. Uzumaki was suspiciously quiet by his side, squinting at the direction they came from warily.
“Hey, Sakura-chan, Sasuke-teme!” he beckoned them closely just as Haruno reached out to test the lower branch. “We need to make sure Kaka-sensei won't find us before we're hidden, right?”

Sasuke rolled his eyes. “Of course, but we can't split. He'll just catch us one by one.”

“You have an idea~?” the intonation of Sakura's question creeped him out, but Naruto somehow seemed undeterred and just bounced in his place happily.

“Hey, I can use my clones to sweep the area and distract him,’ ttebayo!” His blue eyes were wide like saucers and Sasuke was willing to bet, the only reason he hadn't spanned three dozens of his copies yet was the Pavlovian response Haruno somehow managed to instill in them both.

“Sounds great,” she nodded, but clasped Naruto's shoulder warningly before he went for the handseals. “Sasuke, are you going to be okay?”

And, in all honesty, it was a valid question.

Sasuke remembered the hot-white wave of chakra that swallowed him whole yesterday and shuddered. The chakra itself was nothing new in the grand scheme of things, he was used to the spikes and whiplashes from untimely performed techniques since Academy. What scared him shitless was blindness.

The absolute nothingness of milky fog was something he would never experience again if he had a choice. But he was a shinobi, a fighter, a tool. Someone who had nothing but his life and even that was a relative statement.

Sharingan was a curse that made it impossible to forget, he had known it even before his eyes met Kyūbi’s enormous form for the first time. His brother showed it to Sasuke: bodies of his clan members falling on the hardwood floors, spilling blood like water from cut arteries. Hands clawing at necks ripped open. Eyes of his mother, gentle even in death.

You are living on a borrowed time, little brother, until you are strong enough to stand against me. The white fog never settled, hiding the figure of the perpetrator of the massacre - his very nii-san - and changing his voice into a blurry sing-song, Grow up, but never forget. Become stronger, become someone. And when you finally are, find me.

Learn the truth.

Avenge.

In the whiteness Sasuke was blind. The enemy was here, hidden in his own memory: intangible, inexorable, unbanishable. His fear was his weakness, Sasuke knew it, the one he simply couldn't confront alone.

But seconds were ticking away and here Naruto was, ready to solve their problem and provide his team with the first line of defense if only Sasuke said yes. The team. He had to become stronger and avenge his clan, but Haruno was right, he didn't have to do it alone. So he sucked in a breath and said, “Do it, I'll be fine.” And no, he really wasn't, but he also was only one third of the equation and his teammates needed him to go through it.

Naruto probably felt the fakeness in his voice, because he shook his head and looked hopefully at
Sakura. “Can we… I don’t know, make up some sort of warning sign? I’ll go out there, use kage bunshin and come back.”

“Our, dobe, I’ll get used to it…” Sasuke barked, trying and failing to hide his discomfort at being the weak link. It terrified him, the thought of how easily he could be dealt with had one knew his pathetic fear.

“But…”

“Sasuke…” Sakura's voice was gentle, too soft for him to bear when those memories got so close to surface.

He choked on the bitterness in his mouth and squeezed his eyes shut not to see her pity. It tasted like blood on his tongue. Then all at once her smell surrounded him, her hair getting in his face as the girl pulled him in a hug. Sasuke clutched at her dirty red dress desperately like it was his saving grace. He pressed his forehead protector to the crook of her neck, knowing what was to come.

“Naruto, do it!” she commanded and a gust of wind brushed past them, but Sasuke only saw the hem of Sakura's dress. Her hands held him strong through the initial spike of chakra and he couldn't be more grateful to her for it.

“I've got thirty,” Uzumaki announced in a loud whisper and sent the clones off with minimal instructions of hiding, but not too good, leading sensei away from the tree and going out with a bang.

Sasuke slipped away from Sakura when the clearing emptied, feeling his face grow redder with embarrassment. She swiftly trotted to the oak and began her way up, Sasuke caught frowning Naruto by the elbow and tugged him to a branchy cherry birch that seemed just as good cover for two of them as any other tree in the vicinity. He absolutely would express his gratitude to Haruno and probably explain himself but...just not now.

While he went through possible excuses and counted booms of clones decimated by Kakashi-sensei, wiring the traps with dobe’s help, Sakura managed to almost reach the height needed for the technique. Then three things happened at once: Naruto’s clone yelped in the distance, Uzumaki himself blinked owlishly and suddenly swore, and the branch Sakura barely touched snapped, sending her tumbling down towards the ground.

Boys rushed out of their hiding spot in sync, aiming to catch her and praying she doesn’t get hurt too badly. She was crashing through the branches with sounds that were painful to hear, but managed to twist in the air at the last second and landed at the lowest branch with impossible precision. Gravity spun her and for a split second Sakura froze, hanging upside down. Sasuke could swear she was holding on by chakra only.

They stared at each other in shock and then the bark came off the tree, sending Sakura right into Naruto's welcoming arms. Uzumaki’s mouth opened, forming the most ridiculous thing there was to say to Haruno (who was now scariest than ever, covered in scratches, blood and splinters). They were going to die by her hand one day, Sasuke could swear.

“Are you an angel, Sakura-chan?” the blonde whispered, gently lowering her body on the soft moss.

A gentleman after my own heart~

“No, you're not finishing this, dobe!” Sasuke hissed in a vain attempt to silence “cause you've just fell from the sky,” and it was the most hilarious thing Inner could even expect happening to them.
She fucking loved these two.

*Hey, you’re still alive out there?~* she hollered at Sakura, of course aware of the answer. The number of mental middle fingers they’ve flipped at each other over past five years could have become a world record even among the people with dissociative disorder, she was sure. They both were.

“Owch.”

*So you’re peak eloquence today, huh?~* If Inner could muster strength to take control of their physical body again, she’d do it in a heartbeat, but even those sorry seconds she got during the fall were too much of a strain on the connection between her and the moody bitch. So her options were now limited to the confines of their shared mindscape, a sullen vastness of absolute nothingness.

She hummed off key and turned into echo, an intangible presence that was always there, but unreachable without the violet road of *Niki Ishhin*. Inner got used to watching from the sidelines because it was safer this way for them both. Loudness, bright colors, emotions: it all was hidden inside to protect them. She only got out when their body or mind were in danger and it was fine with her.

Outside was too unpredictable. Sakura, on the other hand, was not.

BANG!

“Oi, Kaka-sensei, that was rude!”

“I’ve got him!”

“Ye-hay!”

BANG-BANG-BANG!

“Eight left,” Naruto reported mournfully, rubbing at his lower back. “Kaka-sensei is a perverted bastard and I hate *kage bunshin.*”

The sound of sensei’s name brought Sakura back to reality and the pain, muffled by adrenaline rush before, finally registered. She glanced at her bloodied hands and knees and gritted her teeth angrily. How stupid she was to think it would be so easy! How idiotic was of her to never even think like a shinobi.

“I’m going back up, you two get into the .~”

“You’re hurt, Haruno! You’re not going!” Sasuke tried to interrupt her, but she ignored his *rightful* concern. Sakura was livid and she won’t back down now.

“Get into fucking bushes and conceal your chakra the best way you can~” She pushed herself up and to the damned oak again. She wasn’t going to make the same mistake twice.

Haruno Sakura had been a top kunoichi of the year. Haruno Sakura had perfect chakra control. Haruno Sakura was useless out of the Academy walls. Well, now and here she would change that.

Her fingers grasped the lower branch and bolts of pain shot up her arms like whiplash burns, but she growled stubbornly and sent small tendrils of chakra into tenketsu on her palms and soles of her feet. It had to work out.
Another bang in the north-northwest shook the trees and outraged birds took off from the fenced Training Ground Zero. *Seven.* Sakura put her left foot onto the trunk of the oak and it held.

The cawing grew louder and the cloud of white smoke rose above the northern bushes. *Six.* She made the first step up, still clinging to the branch with both hands, and it held.

Naruto's taunting cackle echoed above the trees and the whiteness mixed with rainbow colored glitter. *Five.*

*I hope he got him~*, Inner whooped, tired but hopeful for successful mischief. Sakura made a mental notice to find out how he even managed to alter smoke bombs without fūinjutsu knowledge whatsoever. Chakra fused into the bark on her command, strong and steady as the girl exhaled to balance herself and let the branch go. Slowly, in devastatingly small steps she began walking up the tree under her teammates’ frightened stares.

Minutes trickled away slowly as she made her way up, meter by exhausting meter, until next clone cried out in the north, farther this time when Sakura bared her teeth in a victorious grin. *Four.* She carefully slid onto a branch not wider than her upper arm, her sweaty back pressed to the tree trunk, and closed her eyes.

There's no evolution without mistakes. There's no mistake without pain. She ached all over, but she prevailed and it was time to do it again.

The world of living is pierced by chakra. It flows through everything we see, everything we touch. Most people don't even feel it though and pass by completely unaware of small miracles the nature performs. You, future shinobi, are here to learn to feel it so when the time comes, you can call upon its power and protect the village.

Chakra can be pliant, easy to control and fierce, unwieldy even. It can ebb away from your touch or cling to it as a second skin. This dichotomy is based on elemental affinities we humans have.

Here, in the Land of Fire, we often have katon, although some clans are more predisposed to it than usual shinobi. Suiton is favored in Land of Water, doton prevails in Earth Country and so on. Most shinobi favor one or two affinities, but it is possible to come to control three or even four. The price is high, however, because the element you are not deeply connected with will be elusive if it is wind or water, or quite destructive, if it is fire or lightning. The earth won't simply move unless you strain yourself too thin or know where to put the pressure. In the end it all comes down to chakra control.

But before controlling it, you have to sense it. The currents, the spark, change of the winds... Nature around you is full of chakra. Close your eyes and feel it move, pass you by. And when you know how it feels in nature, find yourself a pair and try to sense their chakra.

You won't be able, of course, to do it at the age of nine unless you have sensor abilities. So if you feel nothing besides the basic current, it's okay. And if you think there's something else you perceive, please call me. Konoha is always ready to welcome a new sensor.
The view up there was breathtakingly beautiful. The forces of nature created an intricate map of flows and intertwinings where plants met Oetsugawa, Konoha’s second largest river some seventy meters away. Animals and birds inhabiting the vicinity were nothing but a small dots of chakra to Sakura and even her own teammates felt distant from up here. Sensei’s signature she couldn’t track, because shinobi of his caliber probably never let their chakra run free out of battle.

Alone with only sky to watch her Sakura rarely felt such elation, such unity with the world as in this moment.

She sank further back into the oak trunk and tried to reimagine her chakra the way it was described by one of her chūnin instructors. Iruka-sensei was nice and his explanations were always on spot, but it wasn't what made him special for Sakura. Bronze skinned man of apparent Land of Water origin had been the one who noticed her better than average chakra control and gave her the direction to move and improve. He also provided her with permission slip for the Konoha Library’ Shinobi Division where she had found the scroll on *Naimaze-no jutsu* a couple of months ago.

It turned out to be very useful when she wanted to read in peace on the Academy grounds without being found by mooning over Sasuke Ino. They were friends and all for sure, but with graduation looming in the near future Sakura came to cherish her moments of silence too.

She took a deep breath pressed her hands into Ram seal.

“Thank you for believing in me, Iruka-sensei. *Genjutsu: Naimaze-no jutsu!*”

Kakashi felt the balance of chakra ripple slightly and looked up where his pink-haired student's chakra signature shimmered in between the branches of the Konoha Great Oak. It spread like a wave, tuning to the natural pattern of the forest, and Kakashi smiled. His eye told him the crimson dot up above was Sakura, only he sensed not her but a rather small animal, something along the lines of red panda.

Genjutsu wasn't an option he would consider using, but as long as it worked? He'd probably feel much safer if there was someone else in the team besides him able to perform concealment. What really lifted Kakashi's spirits was the way his kids cooperated. None of them had ever thought about splitting up.

Surely he had given them some head start, even went after Naruto's clones first. They really messed up his perception with sheer numbers and amount of chakra Naruto plunged into every single one. *The boy must have a huge headache by now,* he mused, smirking at the memory of his little rampage. Thousand years of pain was a dirty trick, but it was better than his usual decapitation. Kakashi hadn't planned to give sensei's son nightmares. Yet.

As the number of clones receded, it became evident that his little genin chose the Great Oak, possibly the oldest tree in Konoha, as the base of their operation. Someone of the three (and Kakashi suspected the girl) clearly had planned to go big or go home. He sent his own clone to deal with the rest of bunshins then and perched on a smaller brother of a huge tree some ten meters away, interested by the events unraveling before his eye.

When Sakura slipped and started falling, he nearly threw himself in a fray. The thought of losing the girl just a day after team formation filled Kakashi with dread (cursed, this team really was cursed) and understanding - he got invested. But she once again surprised him.

Not only she managed to break the fall and land into Naruto's waiting arms (boy surely got some
points from Sakura's second self for his cheesy line), the girl scoffed at her grazes and cuts and went right back up. By foot, like in chakra walking. Which he hadn't even planned to teach them yet.

Was it risky? Absolutely. Was it stupid? Probably. But it was character showing. Haruno Sakura had a mean streak in her, she also had resolve of steel. Kakashi couldn't wait to introduce her to Gai and maybe Anko. Sakura's Inner would be ecstatic with Dove.

And now with his eye closed Kakashi tracked an animal chakra settle into balance with the world around. Then it squirreled down the oak towards two human marks, one less pronounced, another quite obvious. Until it wasn't. In a split second both Sasuke and Naruto ceased to exist in his perception. Kakashi opened his eye, blinked once, twice, and reached for his hitaiate automatically before shaking his head with a chuckle. He promised not to use sharingan, hadn't he?

So, the kids managed to pull off a genjutsu. Sakura is that one panda-like, Sasuke is a fawn over here in the bushes, but where is Naruto? The thought of their success was satisfying, but bore more questions. What genjutsu was it? Not mirror type, genin couldn't possibly get their hands on something like that. Not suppressing, not eye contact dependent... Sensory, that is. Something that works on the user, not on the enemy... Riyū no Sumin?

Sleep of Reason technique was A-rank and... Kakashi facepalmed so hard he nearly dropped from the tree. The years of ANBU made him paranoid and he was overthinking simplest of things like banal Naimaze-no jutsu! It was available for any genin and even advanced Academy students but was rarely taught and even less often used because of the level of control it took to adjust chakra patterns to match natural energy.

And who did he have in his team? A powerhouse that made three dozen kage bunshin without breaking a sweat just to distract him a bit, a genius who would probably try to stab him with twenty shuriken at once just out of spite as soon as Kakashi entered the clearing and a smartass with apparent ability to take the most useless of all genjutsu techniques and turn it into something quite opposite.

With a satisfied smile the jōnin slumped back onto the homey branch, flipped his book open and let his senses spread. He accepted Sakura's challenge and refused to look for Naruto through any other means than pure sensing now. He also could use some time relaxing while the kids were on their toes waiting for his attack.

A win-win situation, wasn't it?

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Posting this late, sorry! The end of the week was hell workwise and I - a lucky human - caught a cold on Tuesday so not much has been done *stares darkly at the thermometer* But I'm writing, I'm writing!
A/N 2: Actually posting two times a week is going to be real hard so I'm thinking about changing the posting day to Saturday. Two shorter chapters a week or one longer one? What's your preference?
A/N 3: Thank you for all the comments you guys leave! Talk to me more, I promise I don't bite! *smiles shyly to hide canines*
I love you all and wish you the happiest holidays if you celebrate Christmas on 25th <3 If not, stay strong and get ready for a New Year partying!
Much love, Kay <3

Coming next: One overthinking galore, one clan tradition to be brought back to life and many promises that still can be fulfilled
Chapter Summary

One overthinking galore, one clan tradition to be brought back to life and many promises that still can be fulfilled.

Chapter Notes

The song for this chapter is Forgotten Love by AURORA

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“And whose idea it was to disguise Naruto as a mushroom colony?”

“Oh.”

Kakashi-sensei’s face was completely unreadable as he stared down at them. His eye seemed almost charcoal, half hidden under the heavy lid, but piercingly sharp. Not ANBU-sharp like Sakura and Inner came to recognize those subtle changes that made them feel ready to flee from looming danger, but calculating. The girl took a deep breath and opened her mouth to reply, but snapped it shut when the jōnin’s brow shot up at the sight of her wounds.

He turned to dig gauze and antiseptic from his small medical supply pouch and threw both bandages and bottle to her, once again measuring her and the boys with… Sakura had no idea how to call that gaze.

“Mine?” Naruto confessed sheepishly when the silence stretched out for too long. “I mean Sakura-chan said she knew a genjutsu that could hide us but my chakra is too big to pass for some animal and I remembered Ichiraku-jisan said something about mushrooms like they grow even if you pick them cause they have huge roots and Sakura-chan said it was going to work and she got up that tree and we sat here meditating until she came back and showed us the right handseals-”

“Naruto, breathe,” Sakura interrupted his stream of consciousness with a hand on his shoulder and winced from the spike of pain shooting up her fingers. The skin there felt burnt and she desperately wanted to wipe it with antiseptic or jump in the nearest stream just to cool off her scratches, but she had to report first because Naruto was babbling and Sasuke for some reason reverted to one word sentences again.

“It was team effort, sensei. I knew a genjutsu, yes, and Sasuke set traps to make sure we don’t get caught before it is placed while Naruto provided distraction. And he came up with mushroom idea, which is quite smart, don’t you think? Mycelium growth is so thick in this part of the forest that his chakra blended in almost seamlessly! I only needed to tune the frequency a bit and he just disappeared!”

She couldn’t hold back her excitement even if she tried. It was their victory! They had managed to hold for designated three hours!
Sure thing as soon as the time ran out Kakashi-sensei appeared in the clearing, missing Sasuke’s wire traps completely. She really didn’t expect it to work on a jōnin but she was sure he had seen their efforts here and would provide them with a valuable feedback later. But he just landed in the middle of their territory and the first thing he asked was about… mushrooms?

*Maybe you did fuck this up after all~*

*But it didn’t feel like it*, Sakura mumbled as she and Inner both tried to decipher sensei’s behavior. It was hard thing to do when the man stood unmoving and most of his face was hidden under the mask and hitaiate. Was he disappointed? Maybe she had to use something cooler than *Naimaze-no jutsu*? But it was the only technique Sakura knew that could be used without eye contact! Not like she really knew that many…

There were, of course, other options she had read about in the library, but all those jutsu were D-ranks too, of no use in a situation like this and she had never tried them out, when *Naimaze* was already a familiar pull on her chakra system. Either way, genjutsu was their best shot.

Taijutsu was out of question against the jōnin, Naruto only had his clones, Sasuke’s techniques all fell in the heavy offense category and Sakura’s ninjutsu were limited to bunshin (that lost to Naruto’s *kage bunshin* in all departments), acceptable but imperfect *kawarimi* and what Ino lovingly called “hide in a plain side because most of the class is either too stupid to see though it, or too timid or lazy to call us out” which in reality was a simple *henge* they had used sometimes to get into teams they liked during group activities.

Sakura cherished her friendship with Yamanaka heiress for lots of reasons, but spending some time with Shikamaru and Chōji who *always* were Ino's partners because of Ino-Shika-Chō legacy while Ino herself went wild beating the shit out of Kiba, chilled out with Hinata or mooned over Sasuke with Kanda twins? It was just too much of an opportunity to pass up. Especially when group practices were led by Mizuki-sensei who didn’t care for educating the class at all and was a creep at best. Good thing they had Iruka-sensei to really teach them something.

*And what would he say?*

*That you spend too much time in your head, long face, Inner chirped happily. Which isn’t good for shinobi~*

Sakura’s lips turned into a thin line. Of all available options the best was chosen and executed. She even got to learn something new.  

*From near death experience, no less~*

*Don’t be a bitch about it.*

*You could at least thank me!~*

She ignored Inner’s muttering about ungrateful jerks because there really was no reason to be thankful. They inhabited the same body, were the same, albeit split, personality for gods sake! What needed to be done had been done and that was it. The only thing that really irked Sakura was the void where sensei’s words had to be. Or was she overthinking?

Kakashi fought the grin that threatened to break his calm facade. For all their progress, his genin still were kids at their twelve and it was strangely comforting to see them act accordingly. Naruto was bouncing in his place, his head turning from one teammate to another like a feathervane, Sasuke’s
right eye was twitching, but he mostly kept his cool and Sakura… Worry spread from her in almost feasible waves.

She was smart, she was quick, but the girl was brought up by civilians and it was showing. Too attached to a familiar routine of Shinobi Academy she followed the usual ‘mission - completion - reward’ rule. Some would say there's nothing wrong with it - just what chūnin needs to abide by, but Kakashi was no chūnin and he had no desire for this kids to stop at that too. Potential was there in all three of them, buried deep and in need careful nurturing, but there.

Sasuke, for all the years he spent in solitude, still was a clan brat so he was simply waiting for his next orders. Naruto seemed to have that gut feeling that told him to shut up and wait. Sakura clearly had thought the exercise finished and just for that he was dragging the actual end of it. Kakashi found he loved to watch his genin squirm now and then.

Another minute of troubled silence came to pass and Kakashi saw that shadow in Sakura’s eyes shift as understanding dawned on her. The girl flushed pink, her cheeks rivaling with cotton-candy of her hair, and straightened her shoulders. The embarrassment of being caught acting like an excited pup rather than calm and collected shinobi flooded her features and Kakashi decided it was a good time to say something.

Preferably, something positive, because, well, Gai’s advise had already proved right. So he let the smile reach his eye and took a step forward.

“You three did good. I’m proud of you.”

A heavy hand fell on top of Sakura’s head just for a second, ruffling already hopelessly messed up bun, and she thought her heart would burst out of her chest. She stared at sensei in wonder as he did the same to Naruto’s unruly hair and patted Sasuke’s crow’s nest once. They did go-o-o-od.

What a drag, Inner scoffed at Sakura’s internal happy dance, but she was smiling too. Come on, earth to Sakura! You’re the serious one, behave!~

And oh she did.

She didn’t even flinch when Sasuke grabbed her slowly swelling hand and pushed her on the thick moss carpet of the forest floor. She didn’t laugh when Naruto bound his hands trying to spread the gauze while Sasuke plucked splinters out of her forearms. Well, maybe just a little. She kept curses at stinging antiseptic to the minimum and calmly explained the best way to bind her bleeding palm to Naruto once the crust was washed off.

It still felt strange, but her boys were eager to help and Sakura couldn’t but feel pride too at their fretting over her. Judging by sensei’s approving murmurs every now and then, even though he didn’t even spare them a glance, too busy with his book, he shared the sentiment.

Naruto and Sasuke took care of the aftermath of Sakura-chan's fall like it was the most natural thing to do. He's probably got hurt many times, he's good at dealing with wounds, Naruto thought fleetingly, carefully wrapping girl's thin wrist like she told him to.

“You know, I’ve never really used bandages for wounds before,” he mumbled, tearing the edge of the gauze in two and finishing the binding with a clumsy little bow.
Sasuke raised one brow at him, looking up from the cut on Sakura-chan's knee. “I remember at least three instances where you broke your bones, dobe. You never had it fixed?”

Naruto shrugged self-consciously and turned away to grab another piece of gauze. Of course he had broken his legs, arms and even nose more times than he could count on the fingers of both hands. Toes probably too. But it never lasted and as long as the bones didn't stick out, the Fox could heal it in the matter of hours.

*Figures, I have at least something to be thankful for.*

**You better be, kit,** suddenly came the rumble from the depths of his mind and Naruto jumped a little.

*Well, thanks?* It was more of a question really, but the Fox's presence had already vanished. The boy frowned, but quickly tried to school his features back into a smile when he noticed Sakura-chan watch him suspiciously. “Gee, it kinda comes and goes, ’ttebayo! Kyūbi fixes it.”

Something distinctly close to a growl came from Sasuke-teme's throat and Sakura swatted him lightly on the shoulder. She beckoned Naruto closer then and he complied, knowing better than that by now.

“Kurama-sama isn't evil, Naruto. You need to learn… not hating him,” she asked, taking the gauze away and wetting it with antiseptic. “Come here, my blood is all over your hands! You look like you've been elbow deep in my intestines, not treating some shallow cuts!”

“That's because you bled all over the place, Haruno. You shouldn't have gone back up.”

“Hush, Sasuke, it was important.”

“Care to explain?”

“I had to feel the place, but I'm not a sensor type, so I need one of my senses to provide a bigger picture before scanning the area. I don't have Inuzuka nose or hearing, so looking was kind of my only option.”

They continued bickering as Sakura-chan wiped away the blood from Naruto's hands, but there was no real heat, he couldn't but notice. It was just the way she and teme talked now. It felt like home.

“It would make sense if there was a medic in our team,” Sasuke muttered, finishing treating the last of the deeper cuts. “Haruno, I saw books on medicine in your room, are you inclined to pursue this field too?”

Sakura snorted ungracefully at the ridiculous idea and shook her head vehemently. “Thanks but no thanks. I'll leave this to you, boys. I don't have that much chakra to both heal and fight and, frankly, I'd rather fight. If I'm registered as iryō-nin, I'd be forced to stay behind and watch you guys do all the hard work.” Her brows knitted at the thought of sitting ducks while they risked their lives and she gave Sasuke a dirty look. “Nah, not happening.”

*Way to put it, long face~* Inner's cackling echoed in her head, *you expect them even think about it now?~*

But Sasuke surprised them. He paused putting medical supplies away and, instead of going on with 'girls should be medics’ Academy bullshit, simply nodded to Naruto, “Well, dobe, it leaves two of us
to figure it out.”

The blonde scratched his neck in askance with an undignified 'eh?' and Sakura rolled her eyes a bit. Give Sasuke an idea and he will trample the mountains on the way to it. When there's a paved road just available. On the one hand, he was right, a medic could be useful in any team formation, be it tracking, capture, assassination or close combat. On the other…

“We don't have to decide now, Sasuke. We've just started and it could wait until we are chūnin.”

“Yes, but we should think about it,” Uchiha grunted, clearly already mulling over it. Sakura sighed and let the topic go in hopes something new and more shiny would capture his attention sooner or later. Unfortunately, Naruto decided to add his two ryō to the conversation.

“Well, if it's about chakra, then it probably should be me!” he chirped, nudging Sasuke's shoulder with his own, “I have more than enough. I also can regenerate most of my own wounds!”

“Uh-huh,” the older boy nodded, returning the gesture with an obviously skeptical expression on his face.

Naruto groaned and made a pouty face. “Hey, teme, I'm serious! Though Iruka-sensei said healing isn't safe if healer's chakra control isn't good and mine… You know.”

“We can read up on that and practice wouldn't hurt any of us, dobe. Especially you.”

Sakura mumbled her agreement absently and raked her fingers through the crow's nest that in the morning had been her hair. Now it was a mess of knots and small twigs stuck in it. She silently prayed to gods there was a way to comb it back into obedience while boys delved into a heated discussion about chakra exercises until Kakashi-sensei blinked lazily in their direction from his perch.

“Don't get ahead of yourselves, my cute little genin,” he said joyfully. “You will have to work on your chakra control either way. Survive the first month and then we will see if any of you can even try for more than bandages.”

“We'll be the best of survivors!” Naruto yelled, waving his hands in the air like a big seaweed in a pond. Kakashi-sensei chuckled and returned to his book, not honoring that particular exclamation with any response. Sasuke rolled his dark eyes and joined Sakura on the forest floor, hiding the smirk.

“That bad?” he asked, watching her try and fail to extract the burr from yet another knot near her ear.

She hid her face in the bandaged hands and whined “Is it even salvageable anymore?”

Sasuke beckoned her closer with his left hand and patted the right on the moss in front of him. “Come here and give me your comb. You have it with you, don't you?” He measured Sakura with a dirty look and she mirrored it, trying to suppress the fluster.

“Why?”

“Because. Gimme.”

Inner snorted at the image of the mystical rookie of the year grabbing their comb greedily, but then both she and Sakura lost their ability to form coherent thoughts: Sasuke stood behind her back, untied her hitaiate and began oh so very gently untangling her hair. Judging by Naruto bemused and sensei's quite amused expressions, it was a sight to behold.
Cold thin fingers were ghostly brushes at the base of Sakura's nape, deftly pulling burrs and oak bark parts out without any pain. The comb followed in the softest of touches, slowly but surely dividing the locks, and the girl gave in to the desire to close her eyes and relax. It was a long time since someone touched her hair. It felt...

“...nice.”

Wait, did she say it out loud? Blush flooded her cheeks and Sakura babbled out the first thing that came to mind, “How come you're so good at this?”

The fingers in her hair froze, pulling just short of painfully for a second before retreating.

Sasuke didn't manage to hold back a shuddering breath.

Haruno's head was a disaster and he acted on pure instinct, ordering her to sit and let him deal with it. Truth was, he missed the way long strands slipped through his fingers, tickling his palms with neatly trimmed ends. He missed the contrast of dark against his pale skin, he missed his mother's laughter when he braided her hair clumsily, he missed mom.

She had never abided by father's strictness, hardly even cared for his ridiculous 'views on masculinity' in a clan where long hair was a must, a point or pride. She was trying to teach Sasuke to be a proud Uchiha in her own way, not from the position of power their eyes gave them, but by upholding the honor of the clan by protecting the village. Much good it did her...

But she had loved Sasuke and hurt so much. The loss of her was the biggest, most painful hole in his heart that he chose to forget about, knowing it won't ever be whole again. Still, no matter how hard Sasuke tried to quench the memories of her kindness, her joy of simply having him in her life, they always came back to haunt him. So he made attempt after attempt to deface those memories, to break the promises he had made to her: of becoming the protector, of serving the village, of stopping the circle of hatred...

He became rude, proud and ignorant. He cut his hair short, defying the legacy of his clan. He swore revenge on that man.

He closed off and for some time it worked so good, Sasuke actually started to believe there was nothing left in him of that little boy who had braided his mother's hair while she told him beautiful stories of forgotten cities and princesses who wielded the forces of nature with ease. It worked so good until Team Seven came along and thrust him back into reality.

Sakura's hair wasn't ink black pool of coarse locks that could swallow light rather than reflect it. It didn't even reach her mid-thigh, but if Sasuke closed his eyes it still felt the same - like home.

“Sasuke?” he heard Haruno whisper unsurely, “I'm sorry?”

She didn't even know what she was apologizing for! Something in him screamed to run, hide, never acknowledge it happened and never ever touch her again, but the part of him Team Seven had already claimed as their own - the one that went after dobe to the lair of demonic Fox, that was frightened to near stroke when Sakura slipped and fell, that whispered it will be all right if he let them in - won. Sasuke had been broken and left alone by the person he held dear his whole life, but his teammates decided to pick up the pieces and put him back together.

Haruno moved to stand, but his hands acted almost on their own, falling heavily on her shoulders. “Stay,” he said hoarsely. “Let me do it.”
“But why?” she asked again and Sasuke finally found the words to answer her.

“I used to do it for my mom.”

“Oh…”

He could swear the girl bit her tongue not to say anything else and a small crooked smile crept up his lips at the image of her Inner part's probable reaction - he'd write down those obscenities for later study. Sasuke's fingers went back to Haruno's hair, quickly taking the knots apart and combing away the trash out of habit. The color was strange, but not in a bad way. It was different enough not to give him flashbacks and Sasuke found he could get used to it.

When he finished the cleaning process, he snatched the tie from Sakura's nervously twitching fingers and murmured, “She loved complicated updos. I'm probably out of practice, but I hope you don't mind.”

“Oh, sure… I mean I don't!” she shrugged, shaking off the remnants of tenseness from her shoulders, and sat straight. Her voice was full of mirth when she playfully patted his hand lying on top of her hand, “Surprise me, Sasuke-kun~”

Could he ever be more grateful to her bitchy side?

Naruto had to pick his jaw from the ground in a quite physical sense. Of all people he could never imagine Sasuke to be the one for doing magic but what was happening on Sakura-chan's head couldn't be called anything less. Well, she was beautiful even with twigs sticking out in all directions like small diabolic horns and green eyes blazing with determination, but…

“Eh, teme… Can you teach me do that too?”

The words were out of his mouth before he managed to catch them and Naruto ducked, hoping to hide the red that embarrassment colored his whiskered cheeks and ears. That was stupid. And pointless. He wanted to anyway, because Sakura-chan seemed to like her hair being braided and it really looked cool.

Maybe Naruto could do that to his Sexy-no jutsu form's hair too. Maybe Sakura-chan will let him do it for her.

A soft snicker caught his attention and he threw a side glance at Sasuke's direction, ready to splutter any nonsense to cover his slip of the tongue, but teme wasn't laughing. He just shook his head a little, not even looking away from a pink braid that curled around Sakura-chan's head under his fingers, and murmured, “You'd have to start with kumihimo. We don't want Haruno lose her hair because you pull too strongly, aren't we?”

“What's that,” Naruto did splutter at that, having no idea what Sasuke was talking about, but already disliking the sound of it.

“Cord braiding?” Kakashi-sensei joined the conversation for the first time and snapped his book closed. “Aren't you going too hard on him, Sasuke?” His tone was light, but there was something… like an undercurrent to it, heavy with meaning Naruto couldn't grasp.

“It's traditional and helps to enhance finger dexterity for quicker handseals. That's how my… how my mother taught me,” Sasuke shrugged, finishing the braid and folding it into a tight spiral at the base of Sakura’s skull. He gently tucked some loose strands in and did something with his hands, not
a handseal, but some tricky motion that looked like a gesture civilians made before visiting shrines on New Year's eve. “All set.”

Sakura-chan immediately fished a small mirror out of her leg pouch and gasped at the sight of her reflection. “Oh, Sasuke, it's so beautiful, thanks! I've never had something like this done before!” She threw her head back to look at him with awed eyes.

“You're welcome. I missed the feeling anyways.”

Naruto didn't miss a wistful expression on his face as he tapped her forehead with index and middle fingers. The gesture was… personal? Sasuke had never spoken about his family so there was a great deal of trust here.

“You're welcome too then,” Sakura-chan whispered. “Your mom must have been very lucky to have you, Sasuke.”

“She was very important to me,” he nodded stiffly.

Naruto came closer when Uchiha took a ripped in two scrap of the photograph from his weapon pouch and bit his lip. It was a part of the same picture Sakura-chan's mom had in the album. Sasuke caressed the smiling face of a young woman and closed his eyes, taking a shaky breath.

“I broke my promises to her,” he said, “I didn't want to remember. She'd be disappointed with me for the way I am.”

“I don't think so, Sasuke.”

Kakashi-sensei jumped off the branch he was chilling on gracefully and came to stand near him and Sakura. Naruto followed instinctively, drawn to his teammates by the invisible pull of something he hardly ever experienced in his life. Somehow they all huddled into one big pile with Sasuke in the middle and sensei's heavy hand on top of his and Naruto's heads.

“Mikoto-san was a woman of strong beliefs and unshakable faith, Sasuke. Didn't she always say ‘you haven't lost until you gave up’?”

Sasuke's eyes were rimmed with red then, but his slumped shoulders straightened a little. “How do you know about that?” he demanded, staring at sensei from below and the jōnin cocked his head to the right.

“Who do you think taught me to use my sharingan? Your clan called me a thief, but Mikoto-san told them all off and trained me herself. I wouldn't be who I am without her help.”

“It's something she would do…”

Kakashi felt for the kid, he couldn't really not to. His mother was a great woman in her own right, stronger than most of her clanmates and with the will that trampled even the Elders of Uchiha. It was hard not to miss her even though their acquaintance could only be called fleetingly short. She only trained Kakashi for three months after Kannabi bridge disaster, but her philosophy got ingrained in his mind during those days. While you are alive, you can do better.

He looked down at the genin trio before him and fluffed Uchiha's hair once to get his attention. The boy was holding up better than yesterday, but comparing panic attack and the verge of tears seemed somewhat redundant. Such memories never stopped hurting, but Sasuke looked less of a filled with
“What are those promises, Sasuke?” he asked without a smile. It was a serious matter that could possibly turn out in a full-blown security breach if Mikoto-san had managed to tell the boy something questionable before her death. He almost lashed out when his lone eye met two crimson red with two tomoe spinning slowly in each, but Kakashi wasn't some rabid dog on Hokage's leash. Nothing gave out his readiness to attack and Sasuke blinked, willing the sharingan away.

“Before she… when…” he struggled for words that hung unspoken for years, but Sakura’s hand found a way on his neck and Naruto's snaked to grab boy's wrist and it centered him. “She told me to keep people of Konoha safe. To let my hair down. Not to let my eyes take everything from me. To let go of hate…”

“She was a wise woman, Sasuke,” Kakashi managed to say almost without choking himself. The loss of Mikoto-san suddenly felt like a fresh wound and they hadn't even been close. She had deserved better. “You might have gotten lost on the road of life for some time, but it's never too late to try again.”

Thankfully, his (or Obito’s) favorite excuse alleviated some gravity of the statement and Naruto, bless his full of mischief mind, elbowed his teammate playfully, “You know Sasuke, you shouldn’t cut it anymore! You’d prolly look real pretty with long hair, 'ttebayo!”

Uchiha kid hid his face in his hands, simultaneously wiping the tears that managed to escape his control and smothering laughter, and grumbled mockingly, “Only if you grow out yours, dobe!”

“Ya wanna bet?” Naruto yelled just shy of leaving Kakashi deaf and mortified (he didn’t scan the surroundings for Gai, no, he didn't).

Sasuke showed his teeth in a dangerous grin, “Bet.”

“Boys will be boys,” Sakura murmured with a smile, tied her hitaiate back, careful not to dismantle her braid, and Kakashi found himself the center of her attention. The girl nodded in the direction of the civilian district, “Should we head back, sensei? Patience isn't mom's greatest virtue.”

“You are right, Sakura-chan, it would be rude to keep Haruno-san waiting. Team Seven!”

The trio snapped at attention in a blink of his eye, good kids. Kakashi let the smile reach his eye and commanded, “I and Sakura take main street, boys go around. You shouldn't be seen entering. Naruto, you're under surveillance, so send clones home and maybe market when we reach city center. Go!”

A boy in ANBU uniform was staring into the bushes near Training Ground Zero for the fourth hour in a row when the wave of nausea hit him. A featureless mask shook as he fought off the sense of vertigo for the second time, first being upon his arrival to the surveillance point. He would have to report to the medic once his rotation was over and to Danzō-sama in case there was something of interest for him in this forest.

Too busy checking his vitals, he missed the way his target's signature wavered and split in two. One part dissolved in the forest chakra without a trace and another darted towards Konoha. Thirteen shook his head again and followed the target, leaving the rest of Team Seven behind. They were of no concern at the moment.
Kakashi hummed in satisfaction and returned his forehead protector in place, covering the sharingan. This Root agent was trickier than the one in the afternoon, but he was sloppier too and Naruto’s mushroom idea actually came in handy. He let the pillars supporting genjutsu dome sink back into the forest floor and motioned his team to follow.

The moss would swallow the seals where the pillars once had been before the sun set.

Four shadows, one swift and silent, three not yet there, dashed northwest.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So hi everyone! Merry Christmas and I hope you're having a good time wherever you are and whatever you do! Here's the last bi-weekly update, just in time for those Christmas presents! Yay!
A/N 2: On a more serious note, I'm moving update time to Saturday cause the activity here on ao3 goes up on weekends and I'm a greedy person yeah I love my comments :D
A/N 3: The braid idea ate my brains for so long omg. Finally, finally! For starters Sasuke went with something like this.
So what're your thoughts on this chapter? Are you ready for an Evening with Harunos?
Let me know what you think of the story so far!
Much love, Kay <3

Coming next: The past is just that until just isn't. What Sakura's mother is hiding about hers?
Long time ago Kakashi had last visited this part of the village, not that it had changed much in the past thirteen years. Same shops with then children and now young adults tending to them instead of their parents, an old park named Nidai Kōen - Square of the Second Hokage, small civil clinic huddled between the bookshop and the teahouse Kushina had been so fond of... Kyūbi rampage had not reached this district that fateful night and life here seemed unperturbed by the destruction.

Kakashi followed Sakura through the streets, noticing familiar faces here and there. Civilian lifespan was longer than one of shinobi and people, who probably remembered him as a small genin clinging to his tantō as he ran errands for D-ranks, were passing them by, waving their hellos, 'say hi to your mama, Sakura-chan' and 'it's good to see you again Hatake-kun'. For these people he wasn't a seasoned warrior, not a Sharingan-no Kakashi, not a Friend Killer Kakashi, but just another man who played with sharp weaponry and ate away their taxes.

In a way it felt anticlimactic, like the time had stopped here and the darkness that infiltrated Konoha hadn't managed to pollute this place. Unfortunately, chakra signatures just shy of the edge of his perception told a different story. The village of Hidden Leaf was drenched in hidden agendas and subterfuges like it was in momiji leaves during the Autumn Festival.

Sakura nudged him through a recently renovated gate and, as they passed a sturdy wooden fence, Kakashi found himself in a big clearly cared for yard. Even in winter, some eleven days after New Year, it was brimming with life. Thanks to Konoha's location and mild weather this year the garden was lush with different species of spices and decorative shrubs. Haruno-san must have a green thumb, he thought, carefully navigating his way through the greenery.

A miniature two-storey house colored with white and terracotta paint came into view as the trees gave way. Not traditional style as most buildings in the neighborhood, it would stand out as a sore thumb if not for the almost picturesque sight of it. It was something to be put as a cover for real estate catalog and a fitting home for a civilian girl with a pink hair daydreaming of love and similar nonsense.

But Kakashi felt the familiar thrum of chakra in the bones of the house as clear as under his own skin, calling to him in recognition and his heart skipped a bit. Among the pain and anguish of the loss of Minato-sensei and Kushina he managed to forget completely about the little project he had helped her to bring into life in a year before her death. But the seals carved into the beams and floorboards,
filled with Kushina’s chakra and specks of his own, had not forgotten. They drew Kakashi closer, latched onto him with surprising strength and drank from him. He froze just three or four steps away from the porch, lost in the sensation of ‘coming home’.

But it was not his place. It just had been only for a short while… a really long time ago.

Sakura didn’t seem to notice his sudden hesitancy. She shot up the stairs like a bright arrow and placed her hand onto the door frame, whispering something Kakashi didn’t manage to catch even with his enhanced hearing.

“Sensei, come here please,” she asked him with a smile and reached out for his hand.

Bemused and still somewhat reeling from the promise-fulfilled-forgotten-not lost-welcome-home echoing through him, Kakashi followed her instructions blindly, touching the door frame too. There, under layers and layers of paint and polish, one of the control seals lied, guarding the entry into the house. Did she know about it?

This direct contact with alarm system almost threw Kakashi off balance as his senses went haywire, overloaded with information rushing to him from every subcell. The system recognized one of its creators and tried to push years of reports into his nearly smoked brain. Killing intent, vile thoughts, anger, jealousy, attempts of unpermitted entry flashed before his eyes in a split moment, overshadowed by sadness, agony, loss - inability to recharge - and fulfillment, strength, will - a new chakra source evolving. Then spike of hope and overwhelming power - not creator, but still familiar, pack - and finally everything stopped, letting him breathe again.

Well, at least now I know why this morning’s incident didn’t bring Danzō’s assassins after the kids. The house must have recognized Naruto as Kushina’s son and simply absorbed the chakra Kyūbi let loose.

“We rarely have visitors, Kakashi-sensei,” the girl continued nonplussed, pushing the door open and shaking her boots off, “people usually don’t feel that good here. I think that’s because the house doesn’t like those who come uninvited, but what do I know?” She glanced at him, still holding onto the entrance and his breathing uneven. “It shouldn’t concern you though. You are more than welcome.”

“Welcome home, Kakashi-kun,” boisterous voice came from the depths of the house, followed by the sound of soft footsteps, and a smiling woman in her mid-thirties with hair so yellow it could rival Naruto’s entered the hall, wiping wet palms on her apron. “It’s a pleasure to have you here again, ’ttebane!”

Her dye job got better, Kakashi noticed absently, already moving to greet her. “Ibara… Haruno-san, the pleasure is all mine.” Next moment his hands were suddenly full of her hugging him with strength unprecedented for anyone who didn’t know Ibara Mebuki. *She got smaller too. Or did I just grow up?* He returned the gesture gently, the memory of how fragile she really was flashing before his eyes, brought back by the scent of medicine lingering on her skin under the heavy fragrance of spices.

“It’s Mebuki for you, Kakashi-kun!” she stepped back and swatted him playfully with a towel that was hanging in the crook of her elbow just a second ago. “Don’t tell me thirteen years did something to your memory! Come, the food is almost ready!” She then chuckled at his unintelligible spluttering and disappeared back into the kitchen in a blink of an eye, leaving him tet-a-tet with simpering Sakura.
“So you know mom too.” The girl crossed her hands on her chest and Kakashi felt like crawling into the closest mole hole in the yard to hide from her questioning. Here comes the interrogation…

“We met a couple times back then…” he said carefully, plucking non-existent dirt from under his nails. “She was a friend of…"

“Sasuke and Naruto’s moms, yes, I know,” she shrugged like it wasn't a tightly kept secret, but, well, it kind of wasn't anymore. “She promised to explain if you come for dinner. Isn't it all way too hush-hush, sensei?”

So, Mebuki-san didn't go crazy and told them all the juicy details. Kakashi let out a breath he didn't remember holding and nudged the girl away from the door. “It is, Sakura-chan, but for your own good I'm afraid.”

She blinked at him, the moss green of her eyes blazing with barely concealed desire to punch someone, and turned in the direction of the kitchen. They crossed the hall in silence broken only by her stiff hissing, “I hope there isn't another decree for that or I might do something really stupid~”

Kakashi's encounters with her Inner could be counted on the fingers of one hand for now, but he recognized the intonation nonetheless. This girl, if she managed to survive long enough, would surely make some rumors not only in Konoha, but across elemental countries.

To say Sakura was angry was like to say Hokage Mountain was tiny because she was livid. Inner's enraged punching of invisible walls accompanied by yells like shannarō and damn you fucking hokages was of no help too, so she was really happy when mom threw her a knife (which Sakura caught thanks to instincts ingrained into her by Watanabe-sensei) and ordered to cut some daikon. It was at least familiar routine.

The knife slammed into the cutting board rhythmically, letting her work out some steam, but her head was still free to spawn one ridiculous idea after another. Sensei said there was something dangerous about her mom and her acquaintances. What it could be mom had been hiding? First she somehow knew Naruto to the point she was actually taking care of him until grandpa died (not that it was jealousy speaking, Sakura loved being with dad and in retrospect he had taken a good care of her). Then she knew Sasuke too and, even if he got spooked by her openness initially, the album…

The album, yes. Okay, mom had been a friend of Kushina-sama, that much Sakura found out through her aunt’s journals. Then again, there was a picture of three of them in parents' bedroom, taken just before aunt Rensa had left for her mission. But how come in twelve years of living in this house Sakura had never seen that album and that photo? It could have changed everything, Inner grumbled unhappily. We could be friends with Sasuke at least~

And then the real f-bomb dropped: mom knew Kakashi-sensei too. How, she wanted to scream, why didn’t you say something? Why do you only care when it’s someone else, but not me? No matter how hard I try, you never trust me… Her mother wasn't a shinobi to have as many secrets as she had already spilled! In yet another unsuccessful attempt to calm down, Sakura shook her head and mentally punched Inner.

What would Ino say about all this?

Except for you being the lucky one to only have one parent doing crazy stuff and having unspeakable
Touche, Sakura huffed inwardly. Then a familiar tickling sensation spread at the base of her skull followed by sudden chakra drain, alerting her of someone entering Haruno grounds.

“Boys are coming,” she chirped, pulling her best smile on for mom, and darted up the stairs. The knife clattered on the cutting board beside the watery mush daikon had turned into.

“She won’t be happy when I tell her, am I right, Kakashi-kun?” Mebuki smiled sadly, looking at the ruined vegetable. Her daughter was a bright one, but she also was a troubled one. Of course Kizashi did his best, but the lack of mother figure in her earlier years and that incident never really gave them a chance to become as close as Mebuki wanted. For all the things she tried to shield Sa-chan from, her own past was the only inevitable revelation she dreaded.

“She is smart, Mebuki-san. Maybe not right away, but she will understand.”

She turned away then to hide her unspilled tears from Kakashi. He couldn’t even begin to understand the depth of her treachery. Kushina promised to keep that secret even from her husband, the chances his only living student would know were abysmal.

Mebuki never blamed him for disappearing right after what happened to Kushina. They all had dealt with grief in their own ways. But now he had a new mission and it was her daughter’s safety on the line.

“I can only hope she will. Kushina and Rensa were both like sisters to me, Kakashi-kun, and they spoke highly of you. Please, take care of Sa-chan, will you?”

“Everything in my power.”

She jumped a little when a heavy hand squeezed her shoulder once before letting go. He hadn’t just become taller than a hollow-eyed thirteen-year-old boy clutching red spider lilies in front of the Monument she had last seen him as, but his skills got sharper. Mebuki didn’t even hear him move. She chuckled and looked up to face the grey haired man, her index finger pressed into his chest threateningly.

“I have lost enough and now it is my daughter’s life endangered. Kushina died protecting Naruto-kun. I won’t for a moment believe that Mikoto went down without a fight. If I can, I’d gladly do anything for my girl, but you know my limitations, Kakashi-kun. Tell me, are you to be trusted? I am not a shinobi, but I had been working with people for decades so I know when they lie to me.”

She stared into his eye fiercely, angry at herself for being so weak, angry for her mother not being there to teach Sa-chan, for choosing duty over family, angry at Konoha for doing it to her sisters (not in blood but in spirit they had been). Maybe she was stupid for openly taunting and antagonizing the man in service to the bloody Hokage, but Mebuki still was an idealist at heart and she hoped, oh how she hoped he will remember the promise he had once made.

If Kakashi disapproved of her outburst, he never shown.

“My life is service to the village and its citizens, Mebuki-san,” he said instead, low and sincere and she couldn’t hide the relief flooding her features.

She had always been a creature of emotion, it ran too deep in her old blood, so she hugged him fiercely, hiding her face in his flack vest. It has been more than a decade since one of such vests had
been granted entry into this house. The only one she would actually trust with her Sa-chan and Mikoto and Kushina’s boys, at twenty six Kakashi was an imposing yet trustworthy, even when he actually spoke treason against the Hokage.

“Good,” she whispered. “Good.”

*A missing puzzle piece finally fit into place*, Kakashi thought, watching boys almost roll down the stairs, clean and wearing their own clothes again. Sakura - she got refreshed too and finally shed her absurd dress in favor of yet another black shirt - followed them at much slower pace, a smile on her lips (a construct he had already learned to see through) and shadows dancing in her eyes. She was walking on eggshells while Naruto with bemused Sasuke in tow bounced to tell Mebuki-san of their training, rattling about their chakra affinities and cool jutsu Sakura-chan knew that saved the day.

*The boy isn’t book smart, but his instincts are to be envied*, Kakashi couldn’t but admit with a heavy heart. *Something streets teach you to survive.* Sincerity radiated from him in waves as he sang praises to Sakura in an attempt to lessen the tenseness in her shoulders (almost imperceptible, but definitely there and the boy knew it because he had been hanging on said shoulders just a minute ago). Unfortunately, Naruto was not aware of the real reason Sakura had been on edge (for sure it was not a simple jealousy). The girl was smarter than that.

Kakashi would bet his second copy of *Icha-Icha Paradise*, she had an idea where this ‘dinner’ was heading and it must have been scaring her. Finding out her mother was on first name basis with both her teammates and teacher after years of metaphorical radio silence couldn’t be easy on her. She was waiting for the other shoe to drop, but was she ready?

The dinner fit among the stranger happenings in Kakashi’s life. The food was absolutely fantastic, he had to give Mebuki-san that, but the elephant in the room was getting more and more apparent. Soon enough boys began throwing glances at the bookshelf in the living room part of the open spaced first floor and Sakura’s polite smiles grew into something Bull would certainly love to show his enemies. The yellow-haired woman seemed totally oblivious to the changes in the collective mood though, probably hoping to prolong this peacefulness (doubtful as it was) for another moment.

“It never came up before, Mebuki-san, but Sakura said you had been growing at the orphanage. This is how you met Kushina?” Kakashi asked in the end. Choosing between his teacher’s lover’s best friend and his student’s comfort he decided to address the problem from afar.

“Not exactly,” woman’s lips turned into a thin line and she put her chopsticks aside with a sigh. “My mother was the one who brought Kushina-chan to Konoha. She was her sealing teacher.”

“Aishi-sama was your mother?” That was a new bit of information for Kakashi, but it explained everything. In a way Sakura really had been connected to both the foreign girl and Kushina because she....

Mebuki smiled at him and stood up from the table. “Let us move this conversation to a place with less number of sharp objects,” she said softly, grasping Sakura’s hand as she passed her by. The girl winced at being caught contemplating something bloodthirsty and followed her mother dutifully, a fake smile back in place. The boys scrambled to their feet fast as lightning, unsure of what was happening, but already by their teammate side.

They all went into the living room where Mebuki sat in a midnight blue armchair, letting kids take a cozy beige sofa. Kakashi took the moment to contemplate his options and decided to perch on the sofa’s back. It was a show of unity in a way, his own manner of lending support to his youthful little genin, *Gai’s catchy vocabulary be damned.*
“Mom?” Sakura asked nervously, when silence stretched for too long again, “You’ve never told me about grandma? Who was she? Why is it important?”

“You know, Sa-chan, it's much easier to procure hair dye when you work at a spice shop.” Mebuki answered cryptically. “The only problem is red doesn't bleach that easily. And brows kind of start falling out with time…”

“Mom?” Naruto caught Sakura’s hand in his own before she tore a bandage off her forearm. Apparently, nervous scratching was a thing here.

Mebuki-san took the old weathered album from the shelf and laid it on the low wooden coffee table between her chair and the sofa. She opened it gently on the first page where on the right there was a group photo filled with a huge amount of redhead men and women standing in the docks above a stormy sea with a battered merchant ship in the background. On the left was a portrait of a young kunoichi with crimson hair and jade green eyes. On her forehead was hitaiate, the symbol on it resembling Konoha’s, but simpler in a way. A spiral.

Thin fingers touched the photo longingly. Mebuki looked into Sakura’s eyes and said softly, “You are a granddaughter of Uzumaki Aishi.”

The village of Uzushiogakure had been destroyed in the year fifty six since the founding of Konoha and eighty five years since Uzumaki Nao had settled on the piece of unconquered land in the place later called Water Country. Uzu had been perhaps the oldest and the strongest of the villages, respected for the longevity of its dwellers and their fūinjutsu mastery. But respect tends to turn into fear and suspicion all too soon where there is no sense of security among the neighbors. Uzu had been a strong village, but it also had been a proud one, forging alliances in the open, unafraid of the knife in the back because of its famed power. This pride, as it often happens, became its downfall.

When masked people came, they took Uzushio’s sharpest, its backbone - Uzumaki and Kanasabi clans - by surprise. Both blood and steel lost to the treachery of mind and the first line of defence fell, leaving the village open for the four winds to tear it apart. In a massacre that followed only one had managed to survive, a three-year-old child brought back to life by the ultimate sacrifice of her dying grandmother. She was found in the ruins many days later when the fog had cleared and Konoha’s help finally came. Uzumaki Aishi had wept for her fallen homeland among the masks that hid the traitors’ faces. She went back to Konoha - her second, now the only home - with a silent child in her hands.

But years before that the heiress to Uzumaki clan and a newly minted jonin of Uzu - nineteen-year-old Uzumaki Aishi - left for Konoha for the first time, bearing the title of the Ambassador and holding a hand of her just turned four student Uzumaki Kushina. Their life in the village Hidden in Leaves was nothing they had expected.

Konoha did not see the world the way Uzu did and its shadows had shadows of their own, its court and jury was deaf to pleading, its executor was claiming himself a god among shinobi. Aishi fell in love with the man fifteen years older than her, a civilian director of the Konoha Orphanage. She called off her arranged wedding with Konoha shinobi whose name she didn’t even know then, already heavy with another’s child. But by refusing a marriage arranged by the villages she almost lost her child and her life.

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She ran and hid and had her baby born in forest depths, away from the danger only to find that danger had already had its way with her. Her ‘flower bud’ was born with heart so weak and chakra paths damaged, she had no way to become a shinobi and protect herself. Aishi left her daughter for
her father’s care then, against tradition giving her his surname, Ibara. She was still there, just never close enough for anyone to see the similarities and her ‘flower bud’ became yet another child of the orphanage. It was safer this way, yes, but it was also a torture.

As missions came and went her daughter turned old enough to dye her hair to hide her broken legacy. Aishi’s student learned and persisted and on the day Mito-sama had given her the key to the demon’s prison the war came again.

Konoha fought and Aishi fought with them, bled for them, bound by the alliance that only worked one way. When news of Uzu’s call for help came, it was three minutes late after the news of its downfall.

In the ruins of her homeland, scorched with fire techniques only two clans of Konoha had known, ravaged by the poison and treachery, Uzumaki Aishi wept under the steely gaze of a three-year-old girl with a wide arc of fresh but already healed scar across her throat. They were the last ones, the lost ones in the sea that was still red with blood.

Aishi had never forgotten and never forgiven, but she was proud like her ruined village had always been and as for Uzushio pride became her downfall too. The heiress of an allied clan of Konoha fell from the hand of the man that once robbed her child from shinobi life. The shadows are just that dark in the forest, they said and her name was left to rot in the archives.

Her student followed suit a decade later.

Her daughter lived on with a hole in her heart and her own child not knowing her roots.

Sakura was born with her hair dark magenta, the shade much closer to her father’s than the one her mother bleached for more than fifteen years. She was born in peaceful times, but her eyes were of her grandmother. She was born to be loved but fates threw her in a fight for her life and mind when she had just turned seven. But she was a proud and stubborn one, a granddaughter of Uzumaki Aishi, and that unshakable will became the key to her survival.

Sakura had no idea what to say. She had her guesses, fueled by the subtle hints in Rensa-obasan and Kushina-sama’s journals, that there was some kind of connection between them and mom besides orphanage. Kyūbi called her Uzumaki blood, but what she had thought to be just a single drop in reality turned out to happen a full quarter. This… She’d read about Aishi-sensei in Kushina-sama’s diary, there were mentions of her in history lessons, books in the library, her name was on the memorial stone. *Loyal, steadfast and deadly*, Watanabe-sensei had said. *Reckless and unbalanced*, history books countered. *Died for the village*, the cenotaph claimed.

*Sang me lullabies when I couldn’t sleep. Gave me my first ink set. Did my first tattoo*, Kushina-sama wrote on the anniversary of her death. The page was crumply and tear stricken.

*She knew who ordered the attack*, aunt Rensa scribbled on the margins of yet another complicated seal formation that made Sakura’s eyes burn just from looking at it. *She’d want me to make sure it never happens again. For Mebuki-neesan, for shishō, I’d try.*

For Sakura Uzushio had always been a concept, a beautiful and tragic fairytale her heart yearned for. But now all those all-nighters full of poring over the map on her wall or the books from the library got a different meaning. It wasn’t just another village ruined by war anymore, it was homeland too, lost long before Sakura had even been born, but a pain in her chest nevertheless.
It was in her blood, that call, that echo of the past, pushing her to stand up after another fall. She was not a clanless, rootless kunoichi, she was a granddaughter of Uzu Ambassador, descendant of the last Uzumaki heir like Sasuke had been a son of the head of his clan, like Naruto was the son of the Fourth Hokage and the last sealmaster beside her aunt. The boys accepted her for who she was, not for some fancy name or any type of legacy (these all were the words of the past and they would create their own), but it would make it easier for Sakura to fall asleep at nights - the knowledge that she too had someone to look up to.

Pride… a dangerous, yet so alluring concept. Sakura still felt the sting from her mother’s distrust, but she had learned to quench her pride long ago. She would take what is given to her and move forward, one step at a time. She would learn from her sensei, from her teammates, from everyone willing to share and when aunt Rensa finally returns, Sakura would stand by her side to protect the only home they have left and those precious people Naruto was so adamant fighting for.

For mom, for dad and Harunos, for Team Seven and those on other teams, she would grow stronger and master one of the Four Greater Seals and the elements would bend to her will so no shadows would be able to steal from her.

Mebuki stared at her daughter anxiously. The truth spoken so openly for the first time in decades hung heavy in the room and oh how she feared her Sa-chan won’t understand her reasons...

Moss green eyes darkened as Sakura looked up from the photograph of her grandmother. “It… is good to know,” she murmured and Naruto frowned on her left from the strength of her grip on his hand, but didn’t let go. “So you haven’t told me because…?”

“Some fractions of Konoha had always been suspicious of Uzumaki, Sakura.” Kakashi-kun said softly before Mebuki found her voice. “Even before the destruction of Uzu rumors of breaking the alliance started to circulate. Then the war began and Mito-sama was too old to use the Kyōbi shall the need arise and a new jinchūriki was an Uzumaki too. People in high places began to fear it was Uzushio’ plan to steal the bijū all along. When the village had been destroyed, many saw it as another threat gone.”

The words rang in the air, military precise and unforgiving.

“So we stayed hidden because if someone knew, they’d come for us.” Sa-cha inclined her head to look back at Kakashi, so serious, so grown up. How come it happened so fast?

“Indeed. It also was the reason I know your mother.”

“How come?” She finally let go of Naruto and turned in her place to face him then. Her voice was sharp as were the lines of her profile. They will become more defined with time, but even now Mebuki could see, her girl would grow up to be a splitting image of her clan both in the appearance and in character. The braid (a careful job clearly of Sasuke-kun’s hands) was yet another reminder of how much was lost between mother and daughter - Sakura had never asked her for an advice or help when it came to looks and Mebuki was too afraid to offer.

While she was silently brooding, Kakashi jumped off his perch and beckoned Sa-chan to follow him to one of the support beams acting as a side for a bookshelf. He pressed her hand to the polished wood and they both closed their eyes, probably feeling something Mebuki never could and never would.

“You feel the way this house is different, don’t you.” The man waited for a nod and patted Sa-chan’s
head with a chuckle, “It is because I helped to build it, in a manner of speaking.”

Green eyes flew open and Sakura looked up at him with awe so evident, Mebuki had to push down that dark feeling of envy that started to raise its dripping with venom head again. She did what she could to shield Sa-chan from the dangers of shinobi world while she had been too small and had no way to protect herself and she would do it again without hesitation even if her daughter will never fully trust her. But outside of this house’ walls there were other people who will teach her, hurt her and protect her. Out there Mebuki could only stay back and pray for her Sa-chan to come home again, safe and whole.

“You did that?”

With a smile she noticed Kakashi-kun was mildly embarrassed from the way her daughter was staring at him. The man clearly wasn’t used to Sa-chan’s hero worship mode. “Maa, I mostly did a some heavy lifting and inked subseals while Kushina worked on the founding stone,” he tried to wave off the reverence in her voice, but Naruto-kun had joined the fray, almost dancing towards them and pulling exasperated Sasuke-kun with him.

“You and my mom did that tickly thingy?” he shrugged with his whole body like a dog that just got out of water and scrunched his nose. “What’s that for? Is it something useful? It was really annoying in the morning, ‘ttebayo! I thought I got fleas!”

Kakashi-kun rolled his eyes with a sigh and corralled them back towards the sofa, this time opting to seat in another chair on Mebuki’s right. “It is a complicated protection system, Naruto. Your mother created it with Mikoto-san and my help, I believe as a wedding present for Mebuki-san.”

Sasuke perched up at the sound of his mother’s name. All the ruscus of the last hour and Naruto's manhandling were getting to him, thinning his already barely there temper, so he listened to the conversation raptly but didn't interfere, conserving his energy for later. Haruno would certainly need some emotional support, but dobe would deal with that, leaving the constructive part of the dialogue to Sasuke. So he sat and waited until his mom's name was brought up. Now it was his time to ask questions.

“Mebuki-san,” he began slowly, “you said you were friends with mine and Naruto's mother. She had never said one word about you or Sakura and when I found the same picture you showed us in the morning in her belongings, it was torn so only me and she were left. Why?”

For a reason still unknown to him she rubbed at her temples with a sigh and took a bottle of pills from the coffee table. “You see, Sasuke-kun… I'm not proud of how I behaved that day, but Mikoto… she could at least try to explain instead of brushing it off as ‘shinobi business’ I had no right to know of.”

“That day?”

“It had been a week since the Kyūbi rampage. We had an argument, an ugly one. I asked her to take Naruto in. “

“What?” he gasped, frowning Sakura and shocked Naruto echoing him. Sensei's face was a mask carefully purged of emotions and Mebuki-san was almost on the verge of tears.

“Please, understand, she was a shinobi and I was not. Council brushed off my plight for adoption immediately, but Mikoto was an Uchiha. A woman of respected clan, a wife of Clan Head… She
refused and we fought. I took double shifts at the orphanage to be there for Naruto-kun at least in that role and she never even came to visit…”

She was biting her lip now and her hands were trembling, but all Sasuke could think of was his mom's sad eyes when she told him not to play with Uzumaki boy. Why? Was she afraid of the Kyūbi? But she was friends with the previous jinchūriki!

“She probably had her reasons, but…” Mebuki-san took the album in her hands and opened it on the last page where the photo of his teammates, one still unborn, had been. “I guess we both were too proud to make the first step and make up. Only when she… only after that day I understood that it could be not her own decision not to get involved.”

“That day?” Naruto asked this time, none the wiser, but Sakura hushed him.

“I tried to apply for foster care,” her mom pleaded, “I truly did! The application didn't even make it to the Council and I had been told explicitly to stay away.”

Sasuke had no words by then, thoughts flashing haphazardly in his head. He was probably heaving, if sudden pressure on his neck and hot hands around his torso were any indication. Naruto clung to him and Sakura was clutching them both to her fiercely.

_We could... we all could have grown together?_ His heart was beating like he just had run a marathon. _I... not alone?_

“But why?” he choked out, curling into himself and Naruto, letting Haruno hover above them protectively. He felt her anger, Naruto's anguish and his own loss of something he hadn't even known he could have so acutely, his eyes started to prickle and the world suddenly became crystal clear like someone just adjusted the focus of a lens.

“Because the plans had already been made for both Naruto and you, Sasuke.” Kakashi-sensei reappeared in front of him in a flash, hiding them from softly sobbing Mebuki-san with his body, and commanded, “Let sharingan go, pup. You've had enough of it for one day already and the evolution so swift can make you go blind. Let it go.”

The tension was bleeding from Sasuke and his eyes turned blood red with two void-like commas spinning slowly counterclockwise again. Naruto felt boy's thin bony fingers dig into his ribs and just before he flinched a voice deep in his mind rumbled, Snap out of it, kit, and help Uchiha before he goes mad. His kind has minds way too fragile.

Help how he whined, gritting his teeth as the pain in his side became almost unbearable.

_You have a big muzzle, kit, so TALK_, the Fox growled and the scratches Sasuke was no doubt leaving on his side began to heal away.

_Why do you even want me to do it?_ Naruto questioned, only mildly aware of his surroundings as he tried to disentangle himself from Sasuke-teme's grip enough to be able to properly talk to him. Sakura-chan must have gotten his idea (or at least she thought he had one) and slipped into Naruto's place.

_Because that's what you want. You can't hide your thoughts from me. Isn't he one of your precious people?_
Well, yes, ’ttebayo! Of course teme is one of them!

Kakashi-sensei tried to get to stuck in some kind of trance Sasuke but got no reaction except for the commas slowing down a little. They moved hypnotically and Naruto had to make a conscious effort to tear his gaze away from them, shivering from the way it filled his mind with whispers. The blonde boy crawled onto the sofa and grabbed Sasuke's head then, not looking in his eyes but on the spot in between of them and pushed for his cheeriest tone, “Hey, teme! Red suits you just fine, sure, we all bow before your fashion sense, but could you turn it off? It clashes with my jacket and Sakura-chan’s hair!”

He continued to babble and “Oh gods help me,” Sakura-chan groaned and sensei choked on the air behind him, but it seemed to do its job. Somewhat.

“Sasuke, get a grip,” the girl hissed sweetly, grabbing short hair on his nape and physically turning him to face her, “or I'm telling Ino you like glittery stuff~ You don't want the whole village to hear that, do you~”

“Oh, what a rumor,” Naruto played along, “cool and mighty Uchiha Sasuke has a thing for glitter! Kanda twins are going to become blinding when they hear it, ’ttebayo!”

“What?!” he sputtered indignantly, shaking off the remnants of his stupor at the prospect of his fanclub running at him sparkling and wailing Sasuke-ku-u-un. Naruto had to give him that, the idea was terrifying and Sakura (whatever part of her came up with this) went up in his ‘to never mess with again’ list, rivaling now for the first place with Iruka-sensei. Sasuke’s pupils melted back into the familiar pitch-blackness and he hissed, “Don't you dare, Haruno!”

Naruto bit back a smile and threw his head back to look at sensei only to catch his eye crinkling in laughter too. The man ruffled his hair and stepped away, letting much less tear stricken and even giggling a little Mebuki-san see them again.

“That's some Uzumaki spirit,” she rasped between her fits of laughter, “Sa-chan, Naruto-kun, give Sasuke-kun some time to adjust to your sense of humor. Uchiha are a bit slow there.”

Naruto grinned at her and, when she pushed off the armchair, reached out for the album hesitantly, “Can we look?”

“Sure,” Sakura-chan's mom smiled and glanced at Kakashi-sensei, “If you won't mind, Kakashi-kun, there is one more thing I need your help with.”

They left the room, but Naruto and his teammates paid them no mind, the photograph of their mothers luring them like fireflies rushing towards the light. They opened the album at the very beginning and huddled over the group photo signed as “Uzumaki clan seeing Ambassador Aishi and her apprentice Kushina off to Konoha.”

Chapter End Notes

Wow, isn't this one a long one? I love this chapter but I won't lie, posting it is a bit frightening because that Uzumaki stuff kinda blew up. No, I'm not sorry. Yes, I will understand if it's not your piece of cake. So let's talk! What are your thoughts on this chapter? What would you like to see in upcoming ones?
Happy holidays everyone and thank you all for sticking with me and this story so far! If I'm still alive after the cooking apocalypse, I will upload chapter 17 on 31st because yay, parties!
Much love, Kay <3

Coming next: Kakashi finds himself at an impromptu party and some revelations find him as well.
Chapter Summary

Kakashi finds himself at an impromptu party and some revelations find him as well.

Chapter Notes

The song for this chapter is Friend Of Mine by Avicii
tw: mentions of attempted suicide

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“They absolutely cannot cooperate, Kurenai! I don’t know what I’ve done in previous life to deserve this.” Asuma took a sip of his sake and propped his head on the open palm, contemplating whether another cigarette was worth the possibility of being thrown out of the bar. Maybe if he asked Kurenai to catch the bartender in a genjutsu…

“I’m not covering for your smoking, Sarutobi, don’t you ever think of it!”

Asuma nearly choked on his drink and gurgled at the red-eyed jōnin sitting on his left something along the lines of “well, I tried.” The woman honestly gave him creeps sometimes with her uncanny ability to read his mind even before the thought could form completely. He coughed out the alcohol that went down the wrong pipe and ordered another bottle with a wave of his hand. If he was going to stay up long enough for Kakashi to arrive with new and hopefully juicy gossip about his disaster kids, he would need more than one jug of the watered down stuff Crooked Kunai posed as a specialty sake.

“I must be cursed, Kurena-a-a-ai,” he whined again, tucking unlit cigarette in the corner of his mouth, “my team is the worst.”

“Mine could give yours a good run for your money, Saru, so if you want to snivel, find another set of willing ears.” If there was any humor to her admonition, Asuma certainly failed to find it.

“They are the worst and you’re so cruel…” he began again, carefully not looking her way for the fear of being the one stuck in a genjutsu. She never used her skills when he needed it, but didn’t hesitate to whip his ass just for the fun of it. “How come I’m seeing such a cold-hearted woman?”

“Oi, losers, how’s it going?”

Both he and Kurenai winced, their banter completely forgotten, and turned to face another familiar face, blissfully unmarred by the heavy weight of senseiship. Asuma contemplated a hasty escape sponsored by timely kawarimi and the fact that the newcomer was openly ogling Kurenai’s long (and absolutely gorgeous) legs, but ultimately decided against it. His chances of getting some had dwindled significantly thanks to the added load of motherhenning duty and leaving his on and off girlfriend in a potentially hostile situation could place him on the couch for a foreseeable future. If he would even be let into her apartment.
“Genma,” he raised his cup in the end, giving the man a death glare that was skillfully ignored, while Kurenai moved over to give Shiranui some room. And get away from him at the same time. Asuma had no idea what happened between them while he’d been gone, but Kurenai didn’t look like a fan of their new companion.

“ Heard you two got stuck with clan brats,” tokubetsu snickered, helping himself to Asuma’s sake and, alas, here were the new ears! For the opportunity to complain to someone Sarutobi Asuma could forgive some of Shiranui’s arrogance. At least until he would try to make a move on Kurenai.

“They’re horrible,” he offered readily, clinking his cup with Genma’s in a mock salute to the better days. “The Yamanaka heir can leave you deaf in a single sentence, Nara boy needs to be literally carried around and Akimichi… Well, Akimichi is the most adapted, actually. But he refuses to fight girls!”

“Oh man, Ino-Shika-Cho is going to suck this time around I see,” Genma downed his cup and twirled a senbon in his fingers. “What about yours, Yūhi-san?”

Kurenai granted him a suspicious onceover and with a bone-weary sigh turned around on her stool to face the entrance, propped on the bar surface on her elbows. “They’re… there’s hope for Aburame, but I honestly nearly strangled Inuzuka kid twice and Hyūga heiress… You don’t want to go in there, Shiranui.”

“That bad?”

“I just hope Kakashi got the short straw by this point because his team is a disaster waiting to happen and them I totally won’t be able to handle.” Kurenai wiggled her fingers in the direction of the booth where Anko was doing unspeakable things to her Hyūga girlfriend (Asuma still had no idea how that one worked because from his experience Hyūgas were either colder than ice and pretentious or colder than ice and dead) and gave Genma a devilish side eye. “If Hatake somehow makes it work, I swear I will shout that he’s the damn best teacher in the village from Administration rooftop.”

“Now-now, don’t give me motivation, Kurenai-chan,” a bored voice from the bar counter made all three jump and Asuma swore at the sneaky bastard, his ‘fuck you with a rusty tantō’ echoed by Genma’s ‘five senbon up your ass’. Kurenai just stared at the bartender impassively.

“Kai,” she intoned, not even bothering to use handseals, and Asuma once again marveled at his impressive partner. Who else could bust sharingan induced genjutsu with such ease?

She caught the man by the hem of his jōnin vest and with a grunt “nice technique, Hatake,” hauled him over the counter. The shadow clone dissolved with a soft pop and a plume of smoke and real Kakashi sauntered to the trio from the doorway past the same booth where Hyūga girl was now sticking her tongue down Mitarashi’s throat.

“Evening, taichō,” both women greeted him breathlessly, just for a moment stopping their vigorous heavy petting, and Genma sighed enviously. Asuma snorted and another coughing fit was his karmic retribution. This sake was cursed, it just had to be.

The rumor went, Shiranui’s squads were always composed of men, seasoned or yesterday's genin, you name it, but not once in the past year he completed a mission paired with a woman. At that gossip usually stopped abruptly and people stared at Asuma with unnaturally cheery smiles. Was there something he did miss?

“So, what’s the time limit?” Hatake hummed, dropping onto the stool on Asuma’s right and signing his order to the actual bartender who appeared from the backroom. A bottle of sake slid his way
across the wooden surface and he downed the first cup right through his mask before propping his head on his palm and squinting at them.

“Say, Kakashi,” the gentleness Kurenai spoke with was usually reserved for really dumb enemies who didn’t even need a genjutsu to get fucked, “how did your first training day go?”

“Imagine a five-year-old with a sugar high.”

“Kiba,” she groaned right away, followed by Asuma’s “Ino.”

“Now multiply it by at least three and you’ll get Naruto.”

“Feels bad, man,” Genma whistled lowly and reached over Kurenai to pat Kakashi’s back mockingly. “We’ll remember you young, Hatake, good thing they cannot give you grey hair...” he snickered at his own joke and almost fell from the stool with the force of Kurenai’s elbow colliding with his ribs.

“Sorry to hear that, Kakashi,” she murmured, “and how are the other two? What about the girl?”

“Uchiha is, well, Uchiha I guess,” the man rubbed his neck and sighed, peering into his bottle. “And the girl is...a girl.” He shrugged with his free shoulder and blinked lengthily.

Or maybe he decided to take a nap.

Kakashi with his mask and no respect for social norms can as well fall asleep on his friends, Asuma thought.

“So, nothing special?” Kurenai continued to press on, clearly wishing to hear something specific.

“Too early to say.”

“Argh.”

“Indeed.”

“Ew, you’re just a bunch of depressed losers!” Shiranui grinned and without farewell took off in the direction of an opening door. A flurry of compliments and generous flattery echoed through the still relatively empty bar and moments later he already was sweet talking his way into some chūnin’s pants.

“Should we tell him it’s Hagane in a henge?” Kakashi asked lazily, not bothering making a single move to stop the tokubetsu. Kurenai shook her head, squinting in satisfaction like a cat lounging in the sun.

“Leave them to it,” she smiled in that dangerous way that usually promised blood, pain and lots of embarrassment. “Rumors say Kotetsu lost a bet two days ago and now has to spend three hours dressed up as a girl.”

Asuma raised his brow questioningly and scratched his jaw. The beard was a menace, but no way he was going to shave it and let the old geezer win the bet. Eh, bets were a problem of Konoha since Tsunade-sama, even if she hadn’t as much as appeared in the vicinity for twenty how much? Two? Three years?

“Didn’t think he’d go with henge though.” Painted scarlet nails clicked on the surface of the bar as Kurenai continued her musings. “Boy has balls to rise to the challenge...”

“Remind me to never mess with you, Kurenai-chan,” Hatake tipped his head at her and laughed
throatily, “I honestly expected you'd let it slip. Tenrō said the guy probably thought you haven't heard him.”

“I don't care if it's Hokage himself, if someone tries to tell me I'd look better in their sheets than doing my actual job again, there will be hell to pay.”

Her smile was as serene as her eyes bloodthirsty and Asuma felt the shift in his nether regions. How come this woman could get him so hot and bothered with a few words and that hellfire dancing in her irises? He squirmed in his seat, thankful for the baggy jōnin pants, mesmerized by Kurenai’s low murmur. He really missed her during his time with Guardians and past two months since his return were nothing to quell his need for her in both physical and emotional sense.

“Ah, look at Kotetsu-chan!” the woman practically giggled, oblivious to his loss of focus, when Genma’s flirting grew bolder. “Maybe I shall recommend him for seduction squad? He blushes so-o-o sweetly!”

Poor chūnin (he was actually good with henge, Asuma wouldn’t be able to tell it was Hagane if not for Kakashi’s heads up) was redder than a ripe tomato and his eyes darted hopelessly from Shiranui to the exit as tokubetsu went from his usual pickup lines to the full blown courting assault.

“You want blackmail on both of them,” Kakashi chuckled after emptying another cup of his alcohol. It actually smelt much better than the stuff he slipped to unsuspecting genjutsu-bound Asuma. What a moron!

Kurenai just shrugged, her deft fingers already flying through handseals, “Think Genma will manage to sweet talk him into a kiss?”

“After you got him stuck with harassment seminars and solely male partners when he’d tried to steal a kiss from you?”

“Me, Anko, Hanako, Karina… Basically everyone he’s been teamed up with. I’d say Ebisu was a quite destructive influence both on Shiranui and Gai. I did what had to be done.”

“Hey, Gai would never!” Kakashi even straightened from his slouch to glare at Kurenai, but she just waved him off without so much as looking away from the scene. All her attention was centered at the table for two where Genma was nearly bending over backwards to get henged Hagane to like him.

“Gai is too pure for that, true, but that’s because Chouza-san had taught him well. And Ebisu has always been a closeted pervert, you and I both know it.”

Kakashi hummed agreeably and slumped back on his elbow, head half turned to watch the seduction attempt playing out on the other side of slowly filling up bar.

“Actually, Asuma,” Kurenai touched his calf with her foot lightly, sending sparks across his skin, “don’t go too hard on Chōji-kun for his girl-problem, he’s just being polite. Talk to him, or, I don’t know…”

“Ask Gai.”

Asuma harrumphed at what probably was one of Hatake’s blank faced jokes, “Thanks, I think I’ll manage.”

“You better…” Kurenai shook a finger at him in clear warning but at that moment a high-pitched shriek slammed into their eardrums and the conversation was forgotten.
Hagane, his henge broken and chest bandages sliding down his torso from under a suddenly loose crop top, sprinted towards the door at almost impossible without **Flying God** technique speed. The skirt, previously hugging his curves quite nicely, tore at the seams and was barely hiding his pink shuriken patterned briefs. He was screeching something about honor and never betting again and his blush did look rather impressive.

Shiranui followed his escape with an amused stare, shook his head and grandly announced, “And here I was thinking Kotetsu-kun has finally found his true calling.” He then looked over to where Kurenai was sitting, smiled toothily at her around his senbon and disappeared in the direction of washroom.

“He wants war?” the woman almost hissed, grabbed Kakashi’s bottle, took a full swig and slammed it on the table. “I’ll give him war!”

“Good riddance,” Asuma muttered, not interested in getting into this particular trouble beyond watching from the sidelines as his girlfriend made another man’s life a living hell, and turned to Kakashi with a gleam in his eyes. “Hatake-e-e,” he wailed morosely, chewing on the filter of his long suffering cigarette, “they are hopeless!”

Kurenai groaned on his left and with a flip of her dark hair smelling of smoked pepper and chocolate disappeared in the direction of the booth where Anko and Hyūga girl had finally stopped trying to suck each other’s brains out through their mouth. Mitarashi perched up at the sight of her friend and the second Kurenai joined them the entrance flickered and its location slipped away from Asuma’s mind. Yeah, his girlfriend was *that* cool.

“Tell me more about it,” Kakashi chuckled, fifty percent indifference fifty percent sass, but didn’t move from his stool. They clinked their cups again and Asuma thanked gods for giving him such a lazy bastard of a friend. It was going to be a long night.

Drunken Asuma droned on about the way Yamanaka girl managed to throw him off balance with her shrill shouts for an hour already and Kakashi felt like laughing out loud.

First thing first, he was sure the girl - Sakura’s best friend Ino, was it? - had been messing with Asuma just for sheer joy of it. Just because she could. It sounded like something a Yamanaka would do.

Nara probably just went with it and maybe even planned the ‘assault’ and Akimichi boy… Kakashi barely knew anything on him except for the fact of his existence and that he, according to Sarutobi, was a fan of potato chips. Yes, this ‘capture and interrogation team’ still had a long way to go even though Inoichi and Shikaku and Chōza-san had done everything in their power to give their children a head start.

Second thing second, he was so fucking grateful to whatever deity there was that decided to give him a chance for once. A decent, not ‘you die or you die’ chance. With alcohol running smoothly through his system Kakashi relaxed just a fraction but even that was enough finally see it - his team, imperfect they all might be, slipped under his skin long before he even knew them. The three of them were the reminders of the people he had in his life and lost. One day was all it took them to dig into his composure like a pack of hungry wolves and drag the man he was hiding from the world back to the light. The kids were not the ghosts of his past, not his redemption journey. They were Team and it meant everything.

Today was one hell of a unpredictability ride, but things worked out rather nicely in the end. Old
memories resurfaced, but there was less burn and more of some gentle warmth in them now. His
nin showed him a glimpse of what they could become: not self-centered ruination of Uchiha, but a
caring, if gruff, willing to take risks for his team Sasuke; not uncontrollable uneducated orphan, but
quick-witted, protective and gentle Naruto; not useless fangirl, but ready to take the lead, analytical
and crafty Sakura. They made him want to do better, be better and if Kakashi wasn't an
overachiever...

Mebuki-san was sort of a revelation he certainly couldn't pass by too. She quickly got all three under
her wing and Sasuke and Naruto could use some affection for sure. Kakashi won't lie, he had been
surprised but at the same time relieved to feel it as much as them. There was not a small amount of
tension between two Harunos, but they both carried that take no-nonsense Uzumaki blood Kushina
had so often blamed her impulsiveness on. They would work it out since now Sakura was more
aware the reasons of some happenings in her early childhood and Kakashi be damned if boys won't
stick their noses in the family issues until the peace was achieved.

There still was the issue of the clan scroll… Mebuki-san had led him to the small cellar that was the
closest one could get to the founding stone of the house before he left and together, with his chakra
(because she couldn't use hers) and her blood they opened the vault.

Uzumaki family scroll was the only thing Kakashi managed to snatch before Minato-sensei’s house
was overrun with Root after the Kyūbi attack and he too had thought Naruto will be given to
Mebuki-san's care, so the scroll ended up here. But then things went haywire, Naruto was an orphan
under ANBU surveillance and Kakashi barely escaped Root himself, so the scroll lied untouched in
the darkness of Haruno household, dusty and forgotten. Until this day.

It still was too early, too soon for Naruto and Sakura to open it and sign their names in blood there,
reviving the wilted family tree. Kakashi decided to wait with this one out until kids’ chakra got used
to new regime and settled. Mebuki-san, thankfully, agreed, but they still had to tell the kids there was
such a thing as the scroll. Of course Naruto would want to see it right then, but Sakura and Sasuke
could probably hold him back until he conceded. They had waited for twelve years, another two
months were nothing compared to it.

"Are you still here, Hatake?" Kakashi felt Asuma’s foot bump into the leg of his stool and it creaked
in protest.

*Gods know how long it's been since I let myself relax enough not to be here,* he thought sullenly but
a lazy “Hmmm?” was his only answer to Sarutobi's prodding.

The man propped his head on the left hand and stared at Kakashi, studying his covered face for the
signs of something like he was some kind of new bug and Asuma was an overexcited Aburame,
only much tanner and with lots of facial hair. “Leaving ANBU did you good,” the man said
unexpectedly and it was Kakashi's turn to kick the stool of his companion, only in annoyance.

“It's been three days, how much good it could do me?”

“I don't know, man, you're slimier than Sannin's summons when it comes to your actual goddamn
feelings,” Sarutobi scowled at him, suddenly all too alike to his own summons. “But you've just
talked with Kurenai instead of silently brooding in your favorite corner, I bet I saw you laughing
when that chūnin broke into running and, for the Will of Fire, you've pranked us, Kakashi!”

“Did no such thing,” grey haired man hummed, twirling empty sake bottle in his fingers. “It's all
Kurenai's genjutsu or maybe you're too drunk, Asuma. Say 'Ka-a-a-ai'.” He grabbed a chopstick
from the counter and waved it at the older jōnin like a daimyō court orchestra conductor.

Asuma’s eyes bugged out comically at Kakashi’s antics as he caught the reference and his cigarette slowly slipped out of his mouth. “Tailed Beast smack you into oblivion, you're joking now!” he clapped Kakashi on the back with a wide smile. “If we'd known getting you out of that shithole would work like a charm, I’d badger the old geezer until he kicked you out long ago!”

Kakashi rolled his eye and shifted uncomfortably. It's not like Gai hadn't tried to. Yeah, he did, year after year, but ANBU never lets go of its operatives until there are circumstances. Hound's suicide squad had the best results among others and if not for Naruto and Sasuke's graduation, Hokage would never release him from that duty.

The office had given him possible genin teams to test for past five years or so, but those were always doomed to fail right until this Team Seven. It was assigned an official number even before they passed. Kakashi hadn't even been asked to report whether they pass or not, it was a fait accompli.

“You've been away for a long time, Asuma,” Kakashi found himself saying before he could shut his damn mouth, “You've missed a lot.” He certainly had too much today, his thoughts were all over the place and it was dangerous. If someone of his... colleagues decided to snoop around his mind there was a pretty good chance they could sense his barely controlled emotions. Anger (they're playing with lives, we can deal, but children!), envy (your father won't put you in this position, you lucky bastard), fear (you won't be smiling if you've seen what I saw).

“Why don't you bring me up to date then?” Sarutobi was still smiling, but there was a sharp edge to his words and Kakashi swallowed a curse.

“You have much more reliable sources than me.” Official sources left hanging in the air between them, unsaid but almost palpable. Kakashi was rarely as grateful for his mask as now - it hid his bared teeth and opened sharingan eye.

Asuma, on the other hand, didn't have such a commodity. He looked away and bit his lip wryly. “You know I've never asked for it. Being his son, that is.”

Oh, I know, Kakashi wanted to growl, wouldn't I know how it feels to pay for father's sins? But in his spike of anger he remembered something. Asuma had left because he was aware of the foul play his renowned parent let slide. He never condoned it, rather opposed it quite vocally. Kakashi had been in Hokage guard that day, he’d seen the scene. Yes, Asuma was Third's son, but he also was a shinobi of the Leaf.

A hand fell on his shoulder and the words, barely there for anyone not having Hatake heightened senses, found their way in his ear. “We both know where our loyalties lie, Kakashi. We’d die to protect this village and its people. I thought guys there won't let you drown and they didn't if you still are able to smile, but I see now... I had to come back earlier.”

“You found yourself a battle, Hatake, don't tell me you didn't!” He tried to squirm out of Asuma's hold, a wave of panic-not here-stop rising in him, but the man just squeezed his hand tighter, his head lolling into the crook of Kakashi's neck fake drunkenly. “Come on,” Asuma hissed, “Gai caught me today, told me, no, ordered me to do whatever I can to get office off your heels! Maito, man, the absolute sucker when it comes to subtleties! He said Root is after your kids! I don't know what the old geezer is thinking, but hell, man, you're not going to go neck deep alone like the last time.”

Kakashi was frozen in his place. Gai knew. Shit, he had said too much and now his rival, no, his friend was risking his life too. They could go after him if he as much as shows an inkling of
awareness of Konoha's shadowy dealings. Panic gripped his lungs in a cold, cruel hold and he just…
stopped. Memories, decade old and suffocating, resurfaced again.

Kyūbi's enormous form rising above the Hokage Mountain. Kushina's empty eyes. The house that
had been more of a home to him than his own apartment burning down from Sarutobi Hiruzen's
Karyū Endan. Danzō offering him a placement that will keep him on the frontlines. Tenzō, wide
eyes and a bleeding girl in his hands. Third waving the assassination attempt off. Dark eyes never
stopping watching his back.

What have I done?

He came to a sharp crack of a hand on his back that left him with no air to choke on, but it helped.
Kakashi restarted, his brain functional again if a little hazy from the lack of oxygen.

“Asuma, I…”

But the man didn't even let him finish, smacking him upside the head this time with a frustrated
growl. “For a renowned genius you're too constipated, Kakashi. How're you supposed to teach
someone teamwork when you can't even come to your friends for help?”

Friends?

Dark eyes full of exasperation darted away for a moment and Asuma smiled naughtily, reminding
Kakashi of their first meeting in Academy. They had both grown since then, but a noisy brat that had
been Third's younger son was still there, buried deep under shinobi attire and layers of well-crafted
lies. “Come on, dog boy,” he chuckled, dragging Kakashi off his stool and in the direction of still
shimmering with Kurenai's genjutsu booth. “The party's gonna start without us.”

“Party?”

“My Youthful Rival, come join us in celebration of the Most Beautiful Day-”

“Gai, shut it! You're a fucking spoilsport!” Anko wheezed, choking on her colorful as acid trip
cocktail. Enka threw her head back, laughing and patting her partner's back at the same time, while
Gai rained his excuses on them both.

“Got your man talk down?” Kurenai snickered on Kakashi's right, a drink in hand and sandwich in
another.

Asuma hummed agreeably and slid into the seat next to her, making grabby hands at the food. The
plate with karaage chicken took off the table and slowly made way towards him through the thin air.
Sarutobi stole three pieces and tipped his head at the clad in black unevenly cut coat and a number of
just as black sweaters and hoods that obscured its face figure in the farthest corner of the room.
“Thanks, Yanagi! Mmmh, I love chicken!”

“Tell us something we don't know! Ow!” Genma shouted and nearly lost his senbon, bending over
from the punch Gai delivered accidentally along with a new wave of apologies.

Kakashi stared.

The room was small and absolutely not fitting for such a big company, but shinobi in here were
nothing if ingenious. Asuma and Kurenai were huddled together on his right, next to them wearing a deep sea blue silk yukata Enka was sitting on liberally undressed to mesh t-shirt and, hopefully, some pants Anko's lap. Women clearly were both preserving the space and giving Genma a hard time as he tried really hard not to stare at them. Tenzō, still in ANBU garb, but of course without a mask, was sitting silently next to his squadmates with his cheeks full of cashew as always.

Next tucked in the corner was Gai in his usual greens and oranges, now agitatedly chatting with Tenrō. Well, chatting… Inuzuka kept nodding, all the while stealing dumplings from the big plate in front of him. Aburame Yanagi, Team Hound relay master and current leader, was the only one with some space around her because everyone at this party knew better than endanger her fireflies shimmering under her clothes.

Genma was currently slowly walking the wall above her in an attempt to save some dignity and not to fall victim to Gai’s gesticulation. Raidou and Hayate scooted on the left side of the table to give Shiranui some space without even looking up from their cards.

Kakashi blinked.

He was honestly lost, unsure of how it happened and which road led him here, in this moment where most of the people he at some point created some sort of friendly relationship with were sitting around one table and celebrating? He opened his mouth to blurt out a question, but the table suddenly creaked, tilted to the left by something underneath it, and a wet nose bumped in Kakashi’s fingers.

“Awoo?” a huge night-black ninken asked softly.

“I’m all right, Kanmaru,” Kakashi smiled, scratching the dog behind the ear and offering him a dog treat. “Just surprised, I guess.”

“Mmph,” he snorted disbelievingly, but still accepted the cookie.

“Are you trying to steal my partner, taichō?” Tenrō wondered around a mouthful of dumplings with a lopsided grin.

“More like to stay in his good graces in case you'll forget your old comrade,” Kakashi chuckled in response, giving Kanmaru another ruffle of his thick fur. “You don't have to call me that anymore, Tenrō.”

He perched onto the edge of the seat by Hayate's side, taking in the assorted drinks and food. Onigiri looked like his type and those sandwiches Kurenai had been picking at smelt intriguingly good even through his mask. She and Asuma were still talking and Genma was trying to pull Gai in playing some wicked card game that was absolutely rigged, so it took him a moment to notice that the small room suddenly fell way more silent. Kakashi looked up from smelling quite temptingly plate of shrimp tempura and found himself the center of his squadmates’ attention.

“Uh, what? Do I have something on my face?” he asked, but the usual mask joke fell flat. They were still staring, unreadably disconcerting.

“What the hell?”

“Please excuse us for a moment,” Enka announced finally, breaking heavy tension, and in a graceful motion somersaulted above the table. Long sleeves of her yukata flipped after her like a whirlpool of navy and gold.

She landed at the genjutsu barred exit, followed by fuming Anko. Kanmaru agreed to stay under the
table with a whine, obedient to Tenrō’s plea, so Inuzuka squirmed out of his spot and marched towards the others up the ceiling. The long ties of his hitaiate almost dipped into Anko’s forgotten cocktail as he passed it by and he tucked them into the hem of his worn leather jacket. Tenzō and Yanagi repeated his trick, looking absolutely unperturbed as they left the booth and dropped onto the floor in the main hall of the bar. It was not by any means unusual occurrence in the Crooked Kunai - the place as civilian free as possible, created for shinobi by retired ones.

“Gotta grab some more food,” Tenrō grinned, showing others his sharp canines, “Kakashi, we could use your help?”

Alcohol was leaving his system, replaced by adrenaline. First Asuma, now his squad was acting up?

“Sure,” he nodded, not really having any idea where they would put any more snacks as the table was already spilling with them, but deep inside already aware they won’t bring back any. There was going to be talking. If other jōnin in the booth thought this sudden food trip suspicious, their faces betrayed nothing, only Gai gave him thumbs up before reaching out for his hand of cards. Marked already, no doubt.

“So?” He glanced down on Enka when they all spilled out in the main hall, but she said nothing, just grabbed him by the hand (not that unusual treatment from her after years of close Anko-exposure) and pulled him to the closest empty corner.

His squad (not his anymore, but Kakashi still let himself call them that because they were his partners in crime, his days and nights, familiar smell and buzz of small wings, not pack but…), they upped a soundproof barrier while he was not looking. Enka dragged him in, her long, almost down to her knees night-blue hair falling down her shoulders and spine like a royal cape, and stopped between spitting obscenities Anko and frowning Tenzō, cutting Kakashi from the only escape route.

“Taichō, you're a great leader and like a big brother to me. You know that, right?” she pinned him with her burning with so un-Hyūga like fire in her translucent eyes and went on, ignoring his sharp intake of the air at her admission. “You helped me when I was in a very dark place and I am absolutely sure, I was not the only one.”

Kakashi’s wide eye, searching Enka's face for the signs of something else besides controlled fury and inexplicable tenderness, darted to Tenzō for a split second. She must have caught it, the youngest in the squad, the only one that had never seen him ‘picking up strays’, because her deceptively frail hands fell on his shoulders and she nodded. “Yes. I fancy myself thinking we are friends, Kakashi. We may not serve in the same squad anymore, but we still serve the same ideas. We protect Konoha and if you ever need us, we’ll be there.”

“You can never stop being one of us unless it is what you want, senpai.” Tenzō's voice, just like his general attitude to anything beyond architecture and nuts, was mild, but there was conviction here.

“For accepting the leader's position I apologise. It was never my intention to take your place, Kakashi.”

Speaking Yanagi was a rare sight, every sound she made coming out fitfully, scraping her vocal cords. Every word she said was a swallow of broken glass reopening a knife wound down her throat. That - almost losing ability to speak - was her legacy of joining and staying in 'suicide squad'. Tenrō had managed to knit back arteries, grew back muscles, but the damage from let loose Goddess of Wind Rising technique spread to vocal cords and the Weeping Willow of Aburame clan lost her voice and songs. She stayed alive though and as others came and went, she learned to live again.

Way back Kakashi wondered once how come every member of the squad had a mark of his or her
attempt on their neck. Harshest of the wounds Tenrō healed until there was no trace left, but Enka's rope burns, Anko's scars around her cursed seal, Tenzō's scar dividing his jugular in a thick vertical line, Yanagi's lost voice... His own unfinished collar of marred by time seals Kakashi had been hiding from everyone since he'd been fourteen - and every person in Konoha who met Tenrō saw a puckered path of bite marks under his left ear with raised patches of skin where canines tore too deeply. All five of them had done things, stupid, reckless and dangerous, but somehow they got there to the moment when Yanagi was talking and Kakashi's hand flew up in a silent order on it own.

“Yana, please, don't.” Don't strain yourself, he wanted to say. Don't say it. Don't make it feel real.

“Then do not torture yourself,” a dozen of her fireflies blinked at him from under her hoods, lighting up her sharp features and iridescent eyes. “Your survival is paramount.”

“Your trust issues have issues, we all are painfully aware of this fact,” Tenrō decided to add his two ryō to the conversation. “But you and I both know, Kakashi, whether or not you ever stop running for long enough to acknowledge it, we are pack. Your pack.”

“And this fucking pack is goina wipe the fucking training ground with your sorry fucking ass the second we leave this fucking pla-”

“Don’t underestimate the power of decent vocabulary, love.” Enka shut hissing Mitarashi with a pointed glare and a flick at her tenketsu. “What my beloved Anko is trying to say, Kakashi, is that you are ours and your disbelief is quite saddening. It was no joke when I said I see you as an older brother. You did much more good by me than the one I share blood with so, if you are so adamant on us not calling you our captain anymore, I will call you Kakashi-niichan, I suppose.”

Kakashi stared at them, mute and unmoving. It was not what he had expected, their words couldn't be farther for the ‘twas fine working with you, bye’ he readied himself for. He was terrified. His heart could probably break his ribs any moment.

“I…”

“You don't have to say anything, senpai,” Tenzō shook his head, taking a step back, and Kakashi felt less trapped when an escape route appeared in his line of vision. He didn't take it.

“We’ve learnt long ago to read you, idiotic taichō. Just let us know who and how, we'd take care of the rest.” Anko's smile was just a tiny little bit bloodthirstier than usual.

Enka grabbed Kakashi again, but this time before pulling him back to the booth, she embraced him fleetingly, enveloping him in aroma of wet grass and sea salt with an undertone of blood. “Please, don’t do anything stupid,” she whispered and he returned the gesture, swallowing the lump in his throat. His words still were failing him, but mind was firmly set.

“When I start the revolution, you'll be the first to know, Enka-chan.”

“Rebellion?” She bared her slightly crooked teeth and pushed long silky strands away from her eyes. “I'm in!”

“Count me in too!” Tenrō huffed, clapping Kakashi's shoulder.

“I would prefer to be informed as well,” Yanagi's fireflies signed, echoing Anko's less polite exclamation and Tenzō’s “Wherever you lead, senpai.”
They were back at the booth with five more plates of tempura and sandwiches currently hanging from the ceiling on a threads of ninja wire and Kakashi somehow found himself at ease. The chatter trickled around him, letting him drop a joke or a comment here and there, but ultimately stay an observer for now. The night probably almost outdone his day in terms of unexpected revelations: first his pups, now his long time comrades. Friends. Pack… After more than a decade of pushing the very idea of it away, Kakashi felt compelled to give in.

Loud laughter from all sides made Kakashi lay his musings to rest. The genjutsu barrier rippled softly and a burly bald man in his early thirties joined the gathering, waving hello to everyone. Kakashi met his narrow yellowish eyes with a crinkling eye-smile and rose from his place on the end of the bench to properly greet him.

Kanda Yojin was the only chūnin in the company, but only because he had chosen not to advance and got a desk job at Hokage Tower. He barely had any time to meet his comrades, always torn between his job and home, straining to have more time to care for his twins. Kakashi dimly remembered one of the girls had been named after their late mother Akiko, the other was Yukiko for the season they were born.

“How’re your pups?” he asked because it was a polite thing to do and because Yojin really did care. There was no bigger joy for him than to boast about his daughters’ achievements and Kakashi, the lazy ass he had always been, never declined an opportunity to listen to someone who needed minimum input from him but appreciated the company. Now, however, he could partially understand Yojin’s pride at mundane things his girls learned to do. Sakura got tree-walking in one go today and if Kakashi could, he’d probably buzz about it to everyone in this room by now.

“Good, good, Kakashi! They’re graduating from Academy this summer! I’m thinking about applying for tokubetsu in relay and communications then!”

Kakashi nodded, clapping man's shoulder and letting him squeeze on the bench next to Raidō, “That's good, drop by if you want a recommendation.”

“I too” Yanagi’s fireflies blinked in the air before two men, “will be able to provide Kanda-san with a recommendation. Your input in the planning of latest relay maps was quite remarkable.”

“Oh my, Aburame-san, Kakashi, thank you!” Yojin's round face lit up with a bright grin, “That certainly will help!”

His bubbliness could rival with Gai's on some days, Kakashi noticed long ago, but it was less general. He won't be smiling at the passerby or invite an unfamiliar old lady for tea, but for the circle of people Yojin held close? There was no bounds to his loyalty and people couldn't but repay him by doing the same.

Gai, after once again winning against unified force of Genma, Hayate and Raidō, threw his cup up and cleared his throat to catch everyone's attention.

“My Dear Friends!” he struck his trademark Nice Guy Pose, “Today we are all here to celebrate a few things! The first is of course a Joyous Time of Our Blazing Youth!” Anko moaned softly in Enka's hair and Gai reached over to pat her on the head, eliciting a coughing fit from Hayate. “And while the second meant we had to wait for our very hard-working colleague Yojin to arrive, now all guests of honor are here!”

Assorted jōnin and tokubetsu broke into approving murmur and hands started hurriedly pass bottles around to make sure no one had an empty cup. Asuma thrust a glass of something refreshingly
citrusy in Kakashi's hand with a knowing smile just as grey haired man reached over the table to pour Kurenai another shot of her favorite quality sake. Kanmaru wiggled his head on Yojin's lap, an unopened can of beer held gently in his teeth courtesy of Tenrō. A swarm of flashing like an electric garland fireflies crossed to Anko and Enka and dropped a sealed tumbler into Hyūga's waiting hands. The woman cracked the seal swiftly, poured them both another glass of the same rainbow-looking cocktail and with a polite thanks returned the container to the swarm.

Gai waited for the ruckus to subside a bit and continued. “Today is a very important day in my and, I believe, everyone who is here right now lives. We work tirelessly to make sure our Beloved Village and People are safe and now three of our comrades are about to step up in the roles of the Guardians of the Future of Konoha!”

“You will know Joys and Hardships of Senseiship,” he blared on, wiping his tears with a free hand, and Kakashi was torn between facepalming himself into oblivion and tearing up a bit too. Gai, ridiculous but always pouring his heart into every word he said, had that effect on people, even on his ‘hip and cool’ rival. “You will teach, but also be taught. You will be embarrassed, terrified and proud. Not necessarily in that order,” he winked and everyone laughed, almost drowning his next words.

“Kanda-san, did you get them?”

“Yeah, had to juggle things a bit, but I have friends in high places, you know,” Yojin chuckled, taking three scrolls out of his pouch and giving them to Kanmaru.

Kakashi’s insides did a somersault. He had already started to get used to the thought that Team Seven was his team and the very idea of official paperwork had been long forgotten until now. But once he saw the scroll, the reality kind of crashed on him hard. It was really happening. He wasn't ANBU anymore, he was a jōnin-sensei.

Kanmaru shook the table a little as he scrambled towards Gai and when the scrolls finally found their way into man's big hand, he stood up and motioned others to follow.

“Kurenai, Asuma, Kakashi! Approved by the Council of Konoha and Hokage-sama, starting today each of you officially…” Genma and Tenrō drummed on the small chunks of wood Tenzō had grown at their request and Anko inhaled deeply to shout at the top of her lungs along with Konoha’s Beautiful Green Beast, “…is a proud parent of three!”

Kakashi did try to hide his face to cover up for a stupid grin threatening to split his face in two, completely forgetting he had his mask on. It was absolutely in vain though because Gai suddenly appeared in front of him and thrust a scroll in his hand before tackling him in a bear hug, which Kakashi returned if a bit awkwardly. Anko was hanging off Kurenai cackling like a madwoman and Enka was smiling at Kakashi with tears in her eyes. Asuma got his portion of Gai too and when the scrolls had been given out and laughter subsided enough to make out words again, green clad man motioned for toast.

All eyes fell on him, standing proudly by Kakashi's side, left hand slung around grey haired jōnin's shoulders. Kakashi had thought him a closest person he had for a long time, more than a decade now. He could see now that he had much more friends he had given himself credit for (which was none), all of them here and happy for him. But he was sure this outing was Gai's idea as had been every crazy contest and important-before-you-know-it advice. Kakashi could deny it all he wanted, but Gai's constant presence was what hadn't let him grow cold and that's why right now he could feel getting all soft and mushy inside.

This rivalry-friendship kept Kakashi alive and gave him a chance not to fail his team. That's why Gai
was special.

“A moment!” Kakashi said, unexpected for himself even, and lifted his hitaiate to uncover sharingan. “To remember,” he explained for already getting tense shinobi and got eleven human and one firefly-shaped smile in response. Gai almost blinded him with another grin finished with a Nice Guy Pose and bellowed on top of his lungs,

“Let’s raise a cup for the Power of Youth to always be aplenty in our Dear Friends and their Teams!”

*And pack.*

Hundreds of kilometers away from Konoha sea waves lick grey sand and wash away a string of footprints lining the shore. The night is dark, starless even as the sky is drowning slowly in the thick never fading mist.

“You are late.” Man’s voice is harsh, edgy with anger and something else he tries to hide. He doesn't manage very well because his companion averts his gaze and keeps silent, his stormy eyes looking at something far far away in the sea, searching for the ghost lights of the village hidden in the murky haze. “You went to see her again,” and this one is an accusation.

“Mei-san is concerned with the disturbance Gato causes in Wave, Zabuza.” The words sound like whispers of silk as the second shadow falls into step with the first and the sand barely gives in under its ethereal weight. “She said Tessa-san can broker us a safe passage-”

“No!” a man tall to the point of towering over the barely fourteen years old boy grinds out derisively. “We are not returning. I won't risk Mei’s position no matter what Tessa-” he spits the name out like a curse “-promises this time.”

The boy doesn't flinch. “Terumi-san is sure it is safe. She said following Gato's orders-”

“Enough, Haku. We are *not* returning.” Man's face is contorted in a painful grimace, but it is hidden under the bandages that curl around his neck, jaw and nose. He adjusts an impractically big two-handed sword hanging on his back with practiced ease. “Not until Mizukage is dead.”

“As you wish, Zabuza.”

The sea swallows their footsteps as the tide rises.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, what a year it had been! In 2018 I started writing consistently, first for Dragon Age, then for Naruto fandom and oh my it blew up! I hope your year was not as big a disaster as Asuma and Kurenai's disaster kids, but more of Kakashi's - full of unexpected but good surprises :) May 2019 be nice to you!

Anyway, this chapter marks the end of the second day in-story! How do you like the story so far?

As usual, much love, Kay <3

Coming next: Resolutions of the morning after.
morning elegance

Chapter Summary

Resolutions of the morning after.

Chapter Notes

The song for this chapter is Her Morning Elegance by Oren Lavie

See the end of the chapter for more notes

January 12th, year 2019 since the birth of the Sage of Six Paths

Morning welcomed Sakura with a cheerful whistling of birds out in the garden. The sun was already peeking above the colorful roofs of Konoha civilian district, but still not high enough to make her hurry. She yawned till her jaw popped and stuck one foot from under the covers like a probe.

_Are you going to stay in bed for the whole day if it's too cold for your liking?~_ Inner murmured, stirring up from her slumber too.

_You wish_, Sakura grumbled and curled back into the warmth of her blanket with a satisfied sigh. Her muscles and scratches were aching after yesterday's fall and her chakra paths felt sore after Inner’s little breakout, but she still had about forty five minutes before she would have to rush out to start her morning routine. A quick glance at the alarm clock to make sure she would be woken up - and Sakura was out like light.

Thick fog was heavy, numbing the sounds into distant whispers. It settled in Sasuke’s lungs like a twisted disease, growing strong in a matter of seconds and cutting him from the blessed oxygen intake. It spread, shrouding the world in blankness, a white nothingness that his eyes could not breach no matter how hard he tried. He fought it, though knowing already how pointless it was, as the fog underneath his feet moved, wet squelch announcing the inevitable. Garnet bled into white and Sasuke was standing in the pool of blood, still warm and, even though he could not breathe, he knew its smell was sickly sweet.

_Learn the truth_, his mind was replaying idly the voice that shattered into thousands of echoes. _Avenge._

_It is your kind that only brings suffering and death!_ The growl tore through the fog, a rumble so deep Sasuke felt it in his bones. It ate at the blinding haze, each word muting the whiteness and red, and he found he could breathe again.

_Uchihas are liars!_ It was a cry of pain, a memory that did not belong to this place, this time even, but it rang true, whisking the remnants of the fog away until Sasuke could see again, could feel again the water, shallow and tasting of rust, pooling at his feet. The cavern was lit dimly only by the glow
that seeped from the fur of giant nine-tailed beast. Its roar was a maddening sound full of hatred so
sincere, so profound, it crushed Sasuke. He fell to his knees only to shudder himself awake,
clutching at his unsteadily beating heart at the last words of the Fox etched in his mind, descendant
of Uchiha Madara.

Naruto dreamt about the unkempt forest around Training Ground Zero. It was so vast and green even
in the middle of winter, he had never thought there could be such a place in Konoha. It was peaceful,
so close to the wilderness of the village border and undisturbed by usual human commotion. It felt
old, especially the oak Sakura-chan came to like so much.

The Oak, kit. Show nature some respect.

Oh? Naruto turned, even if there was no physical body to repeat the motion in the dream, and found
himself face to face (or was it consciousness to muzzle?) with a giant creature, its silhouette too huge
to see properly as it shadowed the sun and rippled with power. It was enormous, yes, but Naruto still
recognized the Fox’s chakra, maybe not that angry as usual, but definitely its. His, Naruto imagined
Sakura-chan correct him, it’s a Spirit and it’s a he.

You should listen to the girl more, kit, the Fox grumbled and (it was a dream, wasn’t it?) shrunked
to the size of a three storey house, immediately looking much less menacing.

I do! Naruto squeaked defensively, crossing his hands on his chest and looking up defiantly. And
what’s the difference if I call it the Oak, huh? It’s a tree, tebayo! Only now he noticed the fence of
the training ground stand between him and the Kyūbi, the seal dangling from the gates with the gusts
of wind from Fox’s exhales. And then the realization of his own body actually being here too hit
him. Hey, what’s with the cave?

Like mother… The Fox grumbled something incoherent and slumped on the ground, nine tails
fanning out like some sort of furry cape. He prodded his muzzle on one paw in absolutely humanlike
gesture and sighed, staring down at the boy before him. Your new leash is good for you, kit, they
make you happier. I will not lie, this scenery is closer to my liking.

Naruto spun on his heels, seeing the forest around him in a new light as he took a closer look. The
gate and fence of training ground were actually much farther apart from the clearing in reality then
here and the river didn’t flood the Oak roots like it did here, wherever this ‘here’ was. The grass
wasn’t this high back in the real forest too and there certainly was no fallen tree there. Naruto
perched onto its branch absently and scratched his neck under black t-shirt with white empty circle
on it.

There were so many questions in his head and the Fox wasn’t spitting curses and fire, lying rather
lazily on his belly instead. His big ears turned to Naruto and dark eyes studying the boy from under
the heavy lids were only indicators he paid any attention to his ‘prisoner’ at all. Naruto rubbed his
nose, weighing his options.

He could let his better judgement (or lack of it) win and try to break free from this place and get
away from the beast that made people hate him. The Fox harrumphed, as if reading his mind, and
lowered his head on the ground too, looking at the boy with something akin to patient exasperation
in his eyes. Or he could give in and as well use this chance to learn something. Didn’t Sakura-chan
said ‘even mistakes are good cause they mean you’re learning’? Naruto had never been the one to
beat around the bush though, so he shrugged off the idea of wrongness of even speaking with the
Kyūbi and jumped from the fallen tree.
You knew my mom, right? he asked as he sat crosslegged in front of Fox’s muzzle, only the gate and barely a meter of trampled ground between them. What was she like? Did people hate her too? Did you get along?

Hush, kit, remember to breathe! One question at a time. The wind pressed Naruto to the ground as the Fox spoke unhurriedly. He squinted, waiting for the boy to get his bearings, and raised one tail in the air. Your mother had been my partner for fourteen years so, I dare say, I knew her exceptionally well.

Second tail went up as dark eyes squeezed shut. She was a feisty one, no-nonsense and stubborn as Shukaku. You have her cheer and inability to focus, kit. Naruto barely opened his mouth to ask who this Shukaku guy was, but the third tail had already went up. People had been less wary back then and only selected few knew about our partnership. Your mother was well-known and many people feared her, however for quite another reason.

Kyūbi’s muzzle scrunched in a funny way as he told Naruto about his mother’s nickname, as if he was trying not to laugh. Naruto listened to him with rapt attention, catching every word he said like it was water and he had been stranded in Wind Country desert for days. But in a way he really had been.

As for your last question, kit… Kushina was my host, my prison, so there was no reason for me to feel anything but contempt for her. Fox’s expression changed into something Naruto didn’t, couldn’t recognize. But it felt colder in the clearing all of sudden and the clouds appeared out of nowhere, hiding the sun in its thick grey mass. Black eyes met Naruto’s and he shuddered from the feeling of staring into abyss, old, ancient even and filled with ages of loss and sadness. Then the Fox blinked, sighing, and the rising wind carried the clouds away in a blink of an eye.

But she was an Uzumaki and your brood has skulls way too thick and a deathwish when it comes to making friends with dangerous things. Mito was insane about her Hashirama, but she had a great mind. The Fox scoffed, but there was no bite. If Naruto only was able to get his jaw back up, he’d probably notice the Kyūbi was almost smiling.

Hashirama? The Shodai? the boy whispered weakly.

His wife, the Fox nodded, Uzumaki Mito was my first host. She sealed me into her body and, trust me kit, if not for her insanity and constant preaching, I would have tore her to pieces. But… Uzumaki. Kyubi shrugged, rolling his eyes. We spent almost two decades before her death arguing about the concept of ‘soul’ and ‘reincarnation’ because she was dead set on watching me from her ‘promised land’ after she passed. I hope she does, he rumbled and this time Naruto did see his smile.

Mito introduced me to your mother when she turned seventy four, way too old for a shinobi, even for Uzumaki blood, to be able to hold me in. It was more of me holding her by that point. Kyūbi sighed again, making the grass and last year leaves on the fallen tree rustle from the gust of wind. His eyes grew distant and tails spun before settling on the ground. Kushina was ten and the first thing she had said to me was ‘I love ramen and seals, let’s be friends’.

Naruto laughed wetly at that. It wasn’t that hard to imagine it. That’s what he’d try to do probably if not for the hate and scorn Konoha treated him with. That’s how Naruto would probably meet the Fox if not for the darkness he felt towards himself until his team came along.

She was a ball of energy and light, kit, much like you, and hard to ignore. She grieved for
Mito with me and for fourteen years we had been together not once I thought she would leave this soon.

The Fox looked like he wanted to say something else, but the leaves riverside began rustling suddenly and the water of dream-Oetsugawa shifted, unsettled by something upstream. Naruto jumped up from his place at the gate, casting a nervous glance at the Kyūbi in fear he would disappear, but the spirit simply rolled to his side, tails sticking in all directions like a particularly bad bedhead, and muttered, **It is your cue to wake up, kit. Your body is not accustomed to long mental discussions, so we shall continue another day, if you would wish to know more.**

*Of course I do!* the blonde nodded vigorously, staring up at the big spirit with blue eyes full of hope. *You’ll tell me more about mom, will you? And the things she could do? And what you can? He stumbled on his own words, thoughts flying too fast to follow, but the idea already formed and firmly set in his mind. I don’t want to be your prisoner like Mizuki-the-traitor said, ‘ttebayo!*

All of sudden Naruto grinned widely and grabbed the fence, ignoring the exasperated expression of Fox’s face and insistent creaking of the nearby trees. *Ow, Sakura-chan’s gonna be mad at me if I’m not polite! I’m Uzumaki Naruto and I don’t know much about seals yet, but I love ramen too! I have Sakura-chan and Sasuke-teme on my team, you’ve met them already! They are nice, ‘ttebayo! Well, Sakura-chan is and teme is still learning, but he’ll be fine too! And there’s Kakashi-sensei, he knows cool jutsu and seals and he smells funny! I’m going to become real strong and make the village better for everyone!*

The Fox snorted, shaking its head, but scrambled to stand on all fours and bowed slightly to the boy. **You can call me Kurama, kit. Now go.**

Naruto blinked, ready to tell the Fox about Mebuki-san and Iruka-sensei too, but opened his eyes only to be met with a depressing view of his ceiling, crumbling in places and moldy in others. For a moment he was just lying there, staring at nothing in particular as the information settled in his memory. Mito, Kushina, Kurama. He mouthed the names, not daring to say them out loud for the fear of the ones who Kakashi-sensei said were watching him would hear.

Yeah, he was going to become stronger. He would find a way to get rid that darkness that spread through Konoha like a disease. He would find a cure, fix it to make the village a better place so he and his teammates won’t have to live in fear. No more dead clans. No more ruined childhoods. No more twisted secrets.

Little did he know.

If there was something Kakashi hated more than waking up in the morning, it was waking up in the early morning with a bitch of a hangover. His mouth tasted like Gai’s Youth Shake and was dry like streets of Suna. His sorry head felt stuffed with lead and his mask was sticky with half-dried drool. To add insult to injury there was a faint scratching noise coming from his left. It was weak, barely there, but it grated on Kakashi’s nerves more than erratic dripping of the water tap that one time when Kumo nin had caught him and tried to force the information out of him with sleep deprivation and some mind games.

Still half asleep, the man reached out to the alarm seal hub he had the foresight to pass out close to and pushed a scrap of chakra into it. Seconds ticked away with always seventeen minutes behind clock on the wall above the stove - *one, two, three, five, six, no, was there four?* - until the alarm system circuit pushed the report into Kakashi’s slipping thoughts: no breach.
He sighed, cursing that particular part of himself that decided it was a good idea to mix sake and Yanagi’s cocktails yesterday, and slowly pushed up on all fours. The trip to bathroom took him another eternity filled with dizziness, threatening to spill over nausea and horrifying realization - the scratching came closer.

One bleary eye cracked just a bit, adjusting to the dimness of the bathroom and studying the surroundings. The sink was close, but toilet, his white porcelain buddy, was closer and it was the determining factor in Kakashi’s last desperate attempt to at least save the floor and the remnants of his dignity in the fight with hangover he was going to lose. The mask went down, catching on the light stubble and for a minute or two all he could do was hang on and pray to all gods willing to listen for alcohol poisoning to spare him today.

Hadn’t Anko polished her sake and cocktails with a fair amount of beer somewhere in between leaving Crooked Kunai and coming home? How come she managed to stay alive and coherent enough to screw her girlfriend against the shared wall of their apartments at such ungodly hour, Kakashi had no idea, but he was sure that was the reason for the scratching sound (which also meant he had to reapply the seals soon or his life would become an audio rendition of all Icha-Icha books combined). And what was the time by the way?

The doorway Kakashi had crawled through was letting in stray rays of sunlight, which could only happen until eleven a.m. - the windows of his tiny apartment were all east side. But the shadows were still long so it couldn’t be more than nine. An hour until he planned to grace his little genin with his presence, it was still more than enough for him to nap a bit and clean up afterwards.

His mouth was foul and his breath could probably kill a whole platoon without any jutsu, but something, a tiny voice in the back of his head promised him the later he will remember what had made him drink so much, the smaller the number of nerve cells he is about to lose would be. And Kakashi had never been the one to mistrust his instincts, so he just curled on the tile floor and let the drowsiness drag him into oblivion once more.

Sakura flashed through the house, the t-shirt crumpled under her armpits as she struggled to both attach a weapon pouch to her thigh and pack four bentos from yesterday’s leftovers. Cooking chopsticks rolled off the counter and clattered on the kitchen tile the moment she turned away for just a brief second and the girl groaned, tugging at the bandages until they finally fit snugly. Chopsticks were rinsed off, rice and broiled saury stuffed into plain wooden boxes with a side of umeboshi for her, additional chunk of rice for Naruto and seven cherry tomatoes for Sasuke.

She nibbled on her lower lip thoughtfully and grabbed an apple from the counter to add to the pile too. Sasuke was a slender build naturally, but Naruto looked way underfed once his godawful jacket was off. Mind full of half-formed ideas of how to get him fed properly, Sakura tugged her t-shirt all the way down and rushed upstairs to seal the lunch in the storage scroll her dad had given her as a present when she graduated the Academy. She nearly lost her footing on the last step in hurry, but managed to stay upright by latching onto her room doorway.

At least mom wasn’t here to see her in this state, it would be too humiliating.

Mebuki went to open the shop earlier than usual today, but Sakura carefully paid it no mind. Mom had kept the shop closed yesterday to meet and greet Team Seven, so now she probably had a queue of customers already piling in, desperate for their spice restock. If there was a small voice in Sakura’s head whispering about how mom had left without so much as saying goodbye or something along the lines, Inner took care of the wayward thought faster than it could take roots. Sakura was almost thirteen and a genin, by shinobi laws already an adult. Such petty nonsense as being mad at mom for
hiding the truth about grandma should be beneath her.

Then why did it still hurt?

_Cause we had the right to know!~_ Inner’s stance on the issue was easy as breathing - she didn’t like being lied to very much. But Sakura, the logical one, still tried to justify Mebuki’s decision.

_Look, she mentally punched Inner, what if I knew back then? When Araigawa got into my head? He’d see it and then both me and mom’d be killed off or worse. You heard Kakashi-sensei, boys are both special cases, but I’m not._

_I hate when you’re acting all mature and holier than thou! I at least don’t hide that I’m fucking angry!_ Inner screeched, rising closer to the surface._ This village is so full of bullshit an no one cares! Didn’t you see what mom implied? Konoha did it to Uzu! To grandma! Aunt Rensa wrote so too!~

_And what’re you going to do about it? _Sakura asked, putting the scroll with the food away and grabbing another bright dress out of the dresser. She did connect two and two of course, but the information was still scarce and who she was? A genin girl with nothing but a couple of mostly useless jutsu and nothing more in her skillset. _Right now all we can do is wait and watch out, _she thought decisively, ignoring Inner’s rage. _It was the best course of actions._

Sakura tied her hair in a tight ponytail in hopes it will do better today, adjusted her hitaiate and jumped out of the window, squirreling her way down the wall and into the garden. Alert seals tugged at her chakra one last time and settled back into the bones of the house.

One day she would learn how to create protection systems like this and make sure neither her family, her team nor the village won’t be destroyed like her and Naruto’s clan had been. Not from outside. Not from within.

Little did she know.

_Sasuke’s morning routine was simple: roll off the futon, wash up, eat something, go train. It was a chain of tasks easy to follow numbly, robotically even, but today, on January twelfth, monotone routine of Uchiha Sasuke’s morning was suddenly disturbed by an unfamiliar thought that flashed through his mind like a lightning._

_What’s today going to be like? What my team is up to? _It stopped him dead in his tracks, frozen mid step on his way to kitchen.

_What changed? _he wondered, staring at nothing in particular. _Why do I care?_

_The more he pondered the thought, the wider his eyes became from the realization. Sasuke cared. He was concerned for Haruno’s wellbeing and her crazy self. He worried about dobe and his demon prisoner. He was starting to reluctantly look up to his sensei who had known mom and believed that not all was lost for him still. He felt thankful to Sakura’s mother for trying. The epitome of emotionless, he somehow got in too deep and became invested not in one, but four peoples’ lives at once in the span of two days._

_A crow cawed hoarsely outside the house, breaking the spell, and Sasuke blinked back to reality. Was he going to let it happen? Wasn’t he cursed? The questions whirred in his head as he boiled the water and sipped his tea, too unsettled to stomach any food. They didn’t leave him as he put on a pair of black knee length pants instead of usual and absolutely impractical white shorts, nor as he stuffed a tightly curled black and red cords in one of the pockets._

_Hadn’t he promised to never let anyone in again? But hadn’t he promised to be a better Uchiha even_
before that? Could he let his grief-stricken desire to avenge his clan dictate his every choice? That man betrayed the clan, the family, Sasuke himself. Itachi didn’t deserve any sort of commitment from him beyond stopping him from hurting any more people of Konoha. It were his mother’s ideals worth upholding so there wasn’t even a choice to make.

Standing on the run-down from years of neglect engawa of the only house left from the whole Uchiha compound Sasuke chuckled weakly and shook his head. There was no way Haruno would forgive him for being late and screwing her precious plan even if he told her about all the shit that was cluttering his head. His stomach churned and Sasuke found himself hungry all of sudden from all this heavy thinking. There were many things to mull over still, but not willing to meet Sakura’s Inner any more frequently than strictly necessary he decided to continue his self-reflection journey on the way to the market.

Naruto didn’t really have much to do in the mornings. The electricity was out again because some drunk morons had gotten thrown out of the brothel upstreet and a rotten utility pole went down during the following squabble. The pipes were clogged for three days now and old hag Kisaragi from the third floor had probably used all hot water already anyway.

Arguing with the crazy woman wasn’t really worth it, so Naruto just brushed his teeth using some water he kept for his Ikoji-chan. It was a surprisingly stubborn orchid plant Nakadachi-san (a senior geisha in charge of okiya two blocks away) had given him as a thank you for helping out with one of the tea ceremonies when all of her maiko caught a stomach bug. She was a strict, but somehow gentle person who barely cared for villagers’ attitude towards Naruto and let him stick around in his Sexy-no jutsu when the mobs came for him on the Memorial day. Naruto suspected she used to be a shinobi for the way she moved, silent and imperceptible, but Nakadachi-san quickly taught him not to ask too many questions.

There was no cup ramen left in his cupboard, but Naruto wasn’t particularly upset by that. Thanks to Sakura-chan’s mom he was lucky to have both lunch and dinner yesterday and it was enough to last him another day or two until he had to go shoplifting in the market. So he just grabbed his jacket, said goodbye to Ikoji-chan and sprinted out into the streets, hoping to escape the gutter of Konoha before any of drunkards waiting for izakaya across the street to open decided to show him his place. Naruto hated being beat up, but fighting with civilians could cut down his allowance to just the amount of his rent and that would make surviving a little more harder.

He’d just come to the Training Ground Three an hour earlier and maybe meditate like Sasuke-teme showed him yesterday. He really needed to control his chakra better if he wanted to be useful for the team, didn’t he?

The second attempt at waking up didn’t spare Kakashi’s senses, not at all. There were hammers banging inside his head, taste of something that had taken a piss and then promptly died in his mouth and his non-sharingan eye refused to open.

“If Gai talks me into a drinking contest again, I’m officially brain dead,” the man moaned into the thin air, pushing himself upright and making a first attempt at getting rid of his dirty and smelling of the worst sides of bar clothes. The vest and shirt were discarded easily enough, but to take pants off Kakashi had to stand and it was a quest he wasn’t ready for. With a groan he threw his body into the shower and opened cold water on maximum.

His undignified shriek echoed in the small bathroom and through the ventilation system, quickly
followed by bursting laughter from Genma’s - damn him - apartment. Almost freezing rivulets were running down Kakashi’s face and body, doing great job at waking him up as he grimly contemplated the thought of flooding Shiranui’s lair just out of spite. He had been the one to give Gai the idea of the latest challenge after all. *Shouldn’t he suffer for it?*

“Be thankful I’m too lazy to care!” he yelled in the end in response to Genma’s apparent glee and joyful offer of aspirin through the same vent. Usually Kakashi wasn’t the one to let people in his apartment. He wasn’t going to start now even if the newfound idea of friendship was floating in the air and making him nauseous for quite different than hangover reasons. He just got out of the shower and grumbled something even he couldn’t decipher around his toothbrush. That one probably had to be thrown out after the procedure.

When Kakashi, wrapped in a fluffy navy blue towel and water still dripping from dark hair plastered to his face, emerged from the bathroom, the first thing he noticed was a bottle of aspirin on a counter. A single firefly was sitting on top of the plastic cap, blinking ‘*get well*’ in the morse code. He grabbed the bottle greedily, gave Yanagi’s insect his thanks for her concern and downed two pills in one go, washing the medicine down by drinking directly from the tap. It wasn’t the greatest idea, but still better than that one time in Kusa where his squad had no time to filter swamp water and couldn’t use any jutsu for the fear of giving their chakra away. Yes, tap clearly wasn’t the worst choice.

The firefly took off and left the apartment through the crack in the window leaf as usual and Kakashi went to scavenge his fridge for something edible. Fifteen minutes later he was already sauntering down the streets of Konoha towards the Memorial Stone, his precious Icha-Icha faithfully shielding him from winter sun and noisy giggling civilians.

Maybe drying his hair with fūton wasn’t his brightest idea.

Sakura ran through the wide streets of civilian district uptown. People who usually smiled at her as she passed by shook their heads at the sight of her hitaiate now, muttering something about another good girl turning into a ninja whore, and both she and Inner had to make a conscious effort not to lash out in response. That was simply the way most upper-class civilians lived: believing that shinobi were only good for guard duty and kunoichi only fit for seduction and nothing else. Until Sakura’s graduation most of the neighbors thought her Shinobi Academy education to be a fluke and had been absolutely sure she’d follow her mother’s footsteps and inherit her spice shop one day. But when two days ago she had returned home with a forehead protector instead of a usual lace ribbon in her hair, their attitudes shifted accordingly. Now she was one of the unwelcomes in her own district.

Houses here weren’t crawling on top of each other, rather standing good distance apart to allow small gardens take up most of the space and she used it to her advantage, darting between the buildings slower than her teammates were probably capable of, but still much faster than predictably haughty locals would be able to follow. She had lived here for as long as she remembered herself and, while people here were two-faced jerks, wasn’t it still a nice place? The area south of Nidai Kōen was on the pricier side, sure, but it also was one of the most serene in Konoha, maybe except for the Training Ground Zero (but that was a wildlife preserve and therefore anyone without Hokage's direct permission was prohibited from entrance).

Nidai Kōen district was not as crowded as civilian downtown - Naruto hadn’t been as good as he thought at hiding small shudders when Sakura had asked him about his home, so it probably was even worse than she imagined. It also wasn’t off-limits for most villagers as clan compounds were, though Sasuke’s place wasn’t even a compound anymore if Ino was to be believed and she *was*. And surely is was not always way too bright and loud as market district, through where the road to
Kakashi-sensei’s apartment building went.

To think about it, Sakura’s parents weren’t exactly the type of folk to live by Nidai Kōen: her mother was a shopkeeper and father a rather middle-class merchant, both of them shinobi sympathizers to boot. But the piece of land they lived on was coming from father's family, rather small but quite well-known among civilians of Konoha - traders Haruno. Sakura rarely met them beyond traditional pre-Spring Festival family dinner at Akame-obaasan’s place, but she liked them just fine that way. Dad might be grandma's favorite, but she surely wasn’t just as high on the list of her grandchildren, especially since graduation.

Good thing dad had left for Suna, Inner muttered. She wasn’t exactly a fan of their siblings’ meddling or grandma’s flair for drama. They’re gonna drive him mad now that we made it to genin instead of jumping on the civ housekeeping course~

“Dad wants the best for us,” Sakura croaked midrun. If they don't want me there for Spring Festival this year, to hell with them, we'd celebrate as a team.”

You think dad's going to be okay with Naruto? Or with Sasuke?~

“I still think it was stupid to hide all this. We live in the damn house built by our damn sensei and Naruto's mom! It feeds on our chakra so we have to scrape by! After all this shit I won't be surprised if it turns out Rensa-obasan was dead the whole time and mom just lied to us about her mission too!~

“Don't. You. Dare.” Sakura's run came to a halt as she hissed at her mental counterpart. “Mom would never lie about something like this!”

Inner just scoffed and pulled away, dissolving in their shared mindscape. Sakura took off again.

It still was, however, somewhat daunting to believe the actual house had been Kakashi-sensei and Kushina-sama’s work. It was so big and how could just two people build it? She had to get to the core of this, even if it would cost her sleepless nights to understand the basics of such complicated sealing. Sensei promised to help and she would hold him to his word.

The street grew narrower as she skipped over the upturned cart of produce shop owner. Usually Sakura would stay and help the man, but now she had a more important goal and downtown people tended to be quite suspecting towards outsiders, no matter if they wore Konoha headband or not.

Old moldy walls were closing on her now and with a strained groan (her scratches and pulled muscles still were giving her hell) she concentrated her chakra in the soles of her feet and rebandaged palms and scaled the closest building. Right now, when she wanted to cut half the way to the Training Ground Three through the downtown, roofs felt like much more preferred choice and she was willing to give it a try.

Here, above filled with people streets, Naimaze-no jutsu made her chakra feel older, more mature, and a simple henge clung to her like a second skin, hiding her bright clothes under a nondescriptive chuünin attire and turning her pink hair muddy brown. Shinobi weren't rare in this part of the village so the chances she would be recognized were slim as long as she moved fast and didn't attract attention.

Sakura was a lucky one to have a good chakra control and no surveillance sent after her, because her
ruse worked out like a charm and she bypassed Fourteen none the wiser. She didn't even notice a cloaked figure standing in the shadows near the entrance to red lights district and Fourteen paid just another Konoha chūnin merry on her way to training grounds no mind (Danzō-sama wasn't interested in petty low ranks, his targets were rarely below jōnin, Kyūbi prisoner and Uchiha boys being almost only exceptions).

A brown dog with apparent whiskers and long ears flapping wildly on the sides of his head sniffed the air in disgust. It was so close, that strange smell that wasn't even a smell at all, more of its absence - an empty place in the heavy mix of the reeking dumpster, acidic vomit and human urine. Root could hide their chakra, mask their faces for all they wanted, but their scent they couldn't hide, not from the pack.

The dog growled as he scratched a single symbol on the roof tile (almost invisible on the weathered by years and thousands of feet surface) and followed the girl. Kakashi wouldn't be happy if he lost an unexpectedly adventurous kunoichi so close to an enemy, but it didn't mean Guruko won't help his pack to mark the places Root operatives took as their hiding holes. Especially if he could prove himself to Akino and Ūhei who were too busy watching over blonde boy’s copies or Bisuke and Urushi who tailed Uchiha kid.

Guruko might have been the youngest of the pack, but he also was the smallest (except for Pakkun) and the sneakiest. It made him a perfect candidate for treats scavenging, because even if he had been caught, no one had the guts to punish him. But now, since Kakashi got new pups under his wing, he couldn’t stay a wet behind the ears ninken any longer. His Alpha had told him as much before passing out the night before and Guruko was proud to be the one looking after the girl - she seemed to be a clever kid.

She took the right roofs (the ones that would hold her weight) and greeted shinobi that passed her by politely but distantly (though he could feel a whiff of anxiety and adrenaline as they passed by). She also smelled faintly of food.

Kakashi had told him to make sure pinkie got to the training grounds safely and the man was a pack leader, his orders were next best thing after the laws of nature - unbreakable. Guruko would do anything to protect the pup.

Sasuke stared at the food stand in bewilderment. Not that anyone besides Haruno could probably tell it from repulsion or happiness (because Sasuke didn't do happiness, he absolutely didn't), but still here he was, completely at loss of what his damn teammates preferred. Since when does it matter anyway? But it did and was he going to spend any more time lying to himself when he could use it to train and become stronger?

He bought some dango and, as soon as his ryō landed into vendor's hand, darted away from the stand, mortified by his life choices.

There was no way back for him now. He was the last loyal Uchiha and damn the Council that wanted him for his sharingan (would probably just take it away and get rid of him if they could), damn Hokage for lying in his face (and stealing from him), Sasuke would stay loyal, but not to them. He could see it now, what his mother had meant in those last moments before her death.

Fuck those in power who only sought more power and never cared for the lives it took. Sasuke's loyalty would never be to them, but to his team. He would grow stronger and make sure they survive
because what else did he have? Nothing but them and memories that became so interconnected by now, every train of thought he had led to his teammates somehow.

His clan was no more, but so was teme's and Haruno's and they hadn't declared vengeance their endgame. Surely they couldn't just start a war on Kiri, but instead of wanting blood they wanted to protect Konoha, the village that fucked them both up as it did Sasuke. Could it be they forgot what'd been done to them? No, he had seen them both tremble and freeze in fear and panic. And still they wanted peace.

Sasuke hadn't forgotten either. And for three of them he won't forgive.

Sasuke would keep his eyes open and he would find answers. He would take this village's darkest secrets apart and bring the perpetrators to justice for himself, for his teammates, for their dreams. His loyalty would be to his team, but if they want to save Konoha so much, he'd do it for them. With them. Together.

Little did he know.

Urushi bristled at the sight of his target staring into the empty space before him with equally empty eyes. He had no idea what Council, no, piss on them, what Kakashi saw in the boy - he was clearly not really right in the head (with that vacant expression and duck butt haircut of his, that is). How come this could be the famed last Uchiha heir? Geniuses don't usually space out in the middle of the market carelessly like that for everyone to attack at their discretion. Or had he lost his marbles too like his rotten brother?

“If you don't stop trying to burn a hole in his head, the boy will sense us,” Bisuke murmured at Urushi's right, his round eyes fixed on his front right paw like it was the most fascinating thing in the whole world. “And your fur is no better than his so quit scoffing.”

“What? Hey!” Urushi growled, baring his teeth at the older ninken, “My fur is completely fine, thank you very much! My mother was-”

“An esteemed Inuzuka, yes, we all know that. You keep telling that to anyone willing to listen.” The smaller dog flicked a non-existent speck of dust from under his claw and rubbed the ‘shinobi’ kanji on his forehead. Youth was so troublesome these days…

“Because she was!”

“Hush or I will tell Kakashi to take you to Hana-san and check you for rabies. Again,” Bisuke sighed and sniffed at the air, completely ignoring petrified state of his partner. “The boy just made a decision. Huh, dango? Not bad.”

The larger ninken howled soundlessly at the rising above the treetops sun and fell onto his belly, hiding his muzzle and a tuft of spiky fur on top of his head under his paws. This mission was a slow, uneventful torture and old dog Bisuke sure could make it even worse so probably it was better to behave. Whatever Uchiha boy was or was not, Alpha had given his orders loud and clear yesterday (to be honest it was more of slurry and almost incomprehensible) but there was no arguing with their pack leader. If Kakashi said to make sure the boy gets to the Training Ground Three safely, Urushi won't fail. Even if Uchiha had an atrocious duck butt haircut.

Naruto sat under the tree on the Training Ground Three with his eyes closed and mind blank. Well,
at least it felt less cluttered with a mess of ideas now that the Fox - Kurama - made himself at home there. Or whatever he'd done, Naruto didn't really get it, but the Fox - Kurama - called it something that sounded like a sneeze and the world around him became less distracting. Just a tiny little bit.

So Naruto was attempting meditation the way Sasuke-teme had shown him yesterday while Sakura-chan scaled the tree, but it was so bo-o-oring. His foot itched and the wind was tickling his neck and… was there someone else's chakra nearby? His eyes flew open and Naruto found himself staring at two big dogs in funny navy blue vests and hitaiate on their necks. One had its neck and head both bandaged thickly and the other wore **sunglasses**.

The blonde boy opened his mouth, blinked… and snapped it back shut. The dogs disappeared as if they had never been here, not leaving a trace, not even a patch of flattened grass.

“Eh?” Naruto questioned thin air, but got no response. He shook his head then, unsure of himself and settled back into the meditation pose. Maybe that was lack of proper sleep talking. Or, maybe if he concentrated real good, he'd feel that chakra again?

When Kakashi entered Training Ground Three from the Monument's side, Ūhei and Akino were already there, speaking in hushed voices to Pakkun. The pug sat atop Bull's huge head as he usually preferred and his small nose was twitching thoughtfully. He was clearly plotting something.

Kakashi shrugged, surprised to see four of his pack but at the same time not at all. He rarely had time to summon them during his ANBU days (except for training or fighting), but now his schedule became more predictable and they probably decided to take initiative in their paws and join him. He would lie if he said he didn't miss his dogs. Maybe it was time to let them stay at his place at their discretion since he'd be home more often at least until Team Seven was qualified for long term missions.

And that wouldn't happen until Danzō was out of the picture. The headache that finally began to subside returned full force at the very thought about Hokage's shadow.

Kakashi’s hangover was a much more manageable mess now that aspirin kicked in, but there still was a faint pounding in his temples as if he had gotten smashed from both sides with cymbals. Repeatedly. So he made a beeline to his partners, flopped on the ground in front of the dark stone and with a pulse of his chakra activated his sound distorting seal at the base of the cenotaph without a second thought. It was a habit and probably a life-saving one.

“Hey, boys,” the man smiled, reaching out to scratch Bull behind the ears as Pakkun shuffled down to sit on his lap, “long time no see.”

The pug harrumphed and glanced up at his Alpha. “How is your head, Kakashi? Drunk much?”

“Maa, remind me not to mix Yanagi’s stuff with sake next time, will you?” The sigh he let out was still smelling faintly of alcohol under the minty scent of toothpaste.

Ūhei shook his bandaged head and with an unreadable expression pressed his front paws to Kakashi’s long-suffering temples. Familiar chakra filtered into his system, speeding up man’s metabolism, essentially washing out all the stuff that still roamed his system. Kakashi let himself relax a bit, relishing in a newfound feeling of painless serenity.

“You should have called me earlier, Alpha,” the greyhound murmured as he sat back on his hind legs and adjusted his bandages. “Akino doubtlessly could m-manage looking after N-naruto-kun
“What?” jōnin’s brow slowly crept up, “Why would you look after Naruto?”

“Tch,” the other dog grumbled and sent Kakashi a dirty glare above his sunglasses. “You don’t remember summoning us at four in the morning, do you?” After receiving no positive reaction Akino grinned, showing his sharp teeth and barked at the small pug, “Told you he was too smashed. You owe me, Pak.”

“Whatever.” The oldest dog in the pack rolled onto his back, offering his belly to dumbstruck human. “You summoned us all, Kakashi, sent Bisuke and Urushi to guard Uchiha, Guruko went to Harunos and Ūhei and Akino tailed the Uzumaki kid. Who is already here by the way.” He smirked then, his small snot scrunching even more, “You’ve never told us what made you swallow so much alcohol though. Care to share?”

Kakashi was gaping like a fish out of water. He had no memories of summoning his dogs, nor did he remember the orders he had given. Anko’s persuasiveness be damned! Why had he drank so much?

Party, his mind supplied readily. Official appointment and Gai’s toasts flashed before his eyes, followed by the talk his squad gave him and… Oh gods, Gai knows about Root!

“I sent Shiba to Gai’s then?” he croaked, slowly blinking back into reality. If most of the pack watched over his kids - shit they’re really his kids now - and Pakkun with Bull in tow waited for him at the usual place, Shiba was the only one unaccounted. And the only one able to keep up with Gai without being seen.

“Sure,” Ūhei whined, his eyes sharp as he circled Kakashi, “Talk to us, Alpha. Somethin-ng is wrong, we know. You are-”

“Scared,” Akino huffed, not letting the greyhound finish. “Don’t sugarcoat, Kakashi, we’re pack.” He came closer to his human and lied on the ground at his crossed feet. His bright blue eyes sparkled behind the dark surface of the sunglasses, stubborn and decisive as always. “You came to speak with your fallen team, then talk, but let us listen.”

Bull stood up from his spot and gently lowered his big body on the ground behind Kakashi. Not the one to talk, he simply pressed his back against his human’s in a gesture of support. Ūhei curled at his feet next to Akino and his long muzzle came to rest at one of Kakashi’s knees. Pakkun stayed where he’d been, just turned away to give Kakashi space. A moment later soft pawsteps announced Bisuke’s arrival. He didn’t even need to ask what’s going on - just settled at Kakashi’s right and sighed, “All pups are here. Urushi and Guruko will watch over them for now.”

The man closed his eye and leaned back, using the bulldog as his support. Most of his pack were here, surrounding him, lending him their strength and courage as he struggled to voice his thoughts and fears. “Thank you all,” he exhaled as his fingers found Bisuke’s and Ūhei’s fur, stroking their heads absently.

“Hi, Obito. Hello, Rin. Guess what?”

The clearing around cenotaph was silent, only cold winter wind was sending ripples through the sea of tall grass in the distance. There was no answer for him and would never be. But Kakashi had been playing this game with his sanity for a long time and he didn’t need his dead teammates’ voices to know what they would undoubtedly say. So he swallowed the lump in his throat and opened his eye, meeting Obito’s and then Rin’s names on the cold dark stone.
“I made friends.”

The words rang through the air, so simple and naive in a way, but powerful in their sincerity. They broke the dam that Kakashi had built inside his mind over the decades and he found himself unable to stop as he turned his soul inside out in front of the unfeeling cenotaph.

He spoke of the fear of taking the team and the joy of seeing them support each other in a way his never could. Of the Root crawling in the shadows of Konoha and Gai, stupidly selfless Gai that walked up to Asuma and demanded his help. Of Asuma and Kurenai looking at him with badly hidden relief when he - way too drunk to care and almost enough to willingly touch people - let Yojin, Genma and Tenrō squeeze him in a bone-crushing hug. Of Enka’s promise to be there when he needs her. Them all, his ex-squad, but also friends. Pack.

“I have no idea how it happened,” he murmured, smiling at the sound of high-pitched shriek ‘Sasuke-kun~’ coming from the direction of the wooden posts followed by a hooting laughter. “But I think I found something worth another try. Will you forgive me if I try again, Rin, Obito?”

“You can do it, ‘ttebayo!” Naruto hollered and Kakashi couldn’t help but chuckle at boy’s timing making him sound like a voice of the universe itself. If he was looking for a blessing, that probably was it. “Run, teme, run!” Well, that part probably was to be ignored.

“Sasuke-kun~ Wait for me~” That too for sure.

He moved to stand up and his dogs scattered silently to give him space, only Pakkun set his claws into Kakashi’s vest to prevent a fall from his lap. The man grasped the pug and set him onto Bull’s head, then bowed to the Monument politely.

“I apologize for taking so long to see it, Minato-sensei. You were right about Gai. And Kurenai. And Asuma for that matter. I wish you could see how strong they’ve become. We have our own teams now just as you said.” Kakashi’s fingers traced familiar names on granite surface out of habit. “You and Kushina, please watch over us. I promise to take a good care of your son from now on.”

With another bow he took a step back and disappeared in the direction of his pups’ yells, his dogs close on his heels.

People of Konoha went about their business as usual, trading and stealing, arguing and laughing. Deals were made, money paid and missions issued. Civilians and shinobi alike, they were so enveloped in their small bubbles of happiness or sorrow, they had no care for three genin about to meet their sensei on the Training Ground Three.

Little did they know. But they would.

In the Forest of Death an ANBU in a porcelain mask resembling a bird’s head crouched and pressed her bloody palm onto the wet moss. A small cloud of smoke rose from under its fingers, followed by an almost imperceptible flash of white. It disappeared under the metal brace, slithered up the sleeve of the ANBU and came to a halt just behind operative’s ear, taking the form of a gliding snake, its scales the color of a bleached pearl.

“Hello, Uso-nee-chan,” an undoubtedly female voice singsonged as its owner pushed off the ground lightly. She soared into the air and sprinted deeper into the forest, breaking away from the place of summoning.
“You have news-s-s?” the snake hissed, tickling woman’s ear with a long thin tongue as a greeting.

“Haruno Sakura was placed on Team Seven, her jōnin-sensei is Hatake Kakashi. Tell sensei, he wanted to know where the girl goes after graduation.”

“Hatake is-s-s a s-s-strong one. S-s-sage and the Princes-s-s will be pleas-s-sed their friend kept his-s-s word. Anyways-s-s,” snake's flat head nudged the woman in the neck gently, “how is-s-s your mate, s-s-sis-s-ster?”

“Better now since the damned clan backed off. If only her shitty twin did the same!” Even though her face was safely hidden behind the layer of porcelain, the bitterness in woman's voice betrayed her feelings. Still she kept her running even, jumping from a branch to branch with an easy grace almost as fast as the wind. It was the safest way to speak with her summons on Konoha's grounds.

The snake curled around ANBU's neck in a loose coil, her hiss bubbly with mirth, “Did you s-s-sstab him already? I can s-s-share s-s-some pois-s-s-son.”

They disappeared into the thick foliage of the Forty-Fourth Training Ground to the cacophony of cackling laughter and creaking branches.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, guys, thank you so much for 9 thousand hits and 500 kudos, those are overwhelming numbers I never expected! 240 subscribes? If I could, I'd hug every one of you!

A special shout-out goes to my dear friends Mags and Ais who listened to my panicked ramblings today (and do it on a daily basis ahaha) Gals this story wouldn't exist as it is without you!

A/N: things are going to speed up after this chapter! Expect a small timeskip (if my inspiration doesn't kick me in the butt and I don't churn out another 9k monster about training) and we're almost at the first D-rank here!

A/N 2: *shouts from the rooftop* I LOVE NINKEN! MORE NINKEN! DOOOOOOGS!

Much love to all of you, guys, and thanks for your support! <3
harder, better, faster, stronger

Chapter Summary

A week is a long time.

Chapter Notes

The song for this chapter is **Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger by Daft Punk**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Meditation proved to be one of the least entertaining exercises Naruto had ever done. Sitting still was making him jittery and restless and no matter how hard he tried to ‘free his mind’ it only made him feel stupid because he clearly wasn’t getting it. He scratched his nape absently and cursed once the action registered.

“So much for achieving peace of mind, 'ttebayo…”

A soft snicker coming from the bushes made Naruto’s a little darker than usual eyes fly open and a moment later he was already sprinting towards the place where the sound came from (there was no way he wouldn’t recognize Sakura-chan’s Inner and her trademark intonations). The boy squeezed through the branches like a particularly colorful weasel, eager to meet her and make sure he still was in her good graces.

Yesterday’s evening ended quite peacefully: Kakashi-sensei gave three of them their training plans and a rundown of kanji they were expected to know before venturing in sealing any further than standard smoke tags (those Naruto had been capable of creating, even if their self combustion rate was about 50/50). Sakura-chan shared her books on history of elemental countries and some of her writing supplies with him even, which had been nice because he didn’t have any. Still it felt like he was intruding even if his teammate explicitly told him he wasn’t - Naruto was a worrier by his nature.

When he met the girl on the other side of bushes, a wide grin plastered to his lips, she didn't say anything at first, just raised one pink brow at him and he saw something like a shadow of a shadow flash in the moss green depth. Then her lip twitched in a not-smile and she nodded at the earth at her left before returning to her stretches. Naruto settled there readily and flipped open “Tadashi and Setsuko in the World of Chakra” - a book on chakra for kids that Sakura-chan had given him yesterday - with a bone-weary sigh only to find at least dozen notebooks carefully stapled together and filled with neat, careful lines of text under the deceptive cover.

Studying had never been his strong suit if it wasn’t by doing, but he wasn’t about to slack off. Not when Sakura-chan put so much effort into making this book for him out of her own notes and papers. Not when he was the one to hold the whole team back from learning cool stuff like sealing because of his lack of knowledge.

Sakura-chan was busy with her stretches, but when she saw him space out for the third time, she
pushed up from her plank, pulled dark magenta from sweat hair away from her forehead and let one hand fall on Naruto’s shoulder. “Listen-” she said almost too quiet for him to hear, “those clones of yours… They were solid, hmm? How do they work? How you control so many at once?” She looked thoughtful, as if he was a puzzle she almost knew how to crack.

“Uh…” Naruto scratched his neck self-consciously. He didn’t have any idea other than they were easy for him to cast unlike usual bunshin and… “They’re kind of listen to what I say and don’t dissolve until get hit or I order them to, I suppose. That’s not how bunshin works?” he trailed off, unsure.

“Nah, you need to control every action of a usual clone,” she hummed. “Consciously.” Naruto’s face was probably mirroring his confusion because Sakura-chan sighed and rubbed her temples, looking for an example. “As a puppet, but with your will instead of strings, that’s why no one usually uses more than two. Too taxing.”

“I don’t do that,” the blonde shrugged none the wiser. “I just imagine what I need to do or tell ‘em, ‘ttebayo. And I remember what they did after they puff away, so I know they didn’t just sneak away.” Sakura-chan just sat there, staring at him hard like she had been given a candy.

“That’s great, Naruto!” she croaked, grabbing both his shoulders and shaking the boy in agitation. “Come on, make one!”

Naruto did, his fingers shaping clone seal surely, and an exact copy of him crouched in front of Sakura-chan a moment later.

“Hmm, let’s try this. You-” she pointed at the clone, “are reading on the reign of the Shodai and beginnings of unified chakra studies. It’s only fifty pages and I put in some fun details so it won’t be too boring.”

The clone made an aborted motion to argue her command, but Naruto growled at him and the boy snapped into action with a forlorn ‘yes, Boss’. Sakura-chan looked like she wanted to say something else, but there was a rustle of the leaves in the direction of the village. The girl stared past him, a dangerous smile blossoming on her lips. “Hey, look, it’s Sasuke-kun~” she almost cooed and next thing Naruto knew he was dragged somewhere with his limbs flailing.

Sakura knew they had an image to uphold, that’s why instead of peacefully going through katas with her teammates she was currently chasing wide-eyed Sasuke around the training ground, chortling Naruto hot on her heels. It’s not like Sasuke couldn’t exactly outrun her, but he just kept a somewhat safe distance from her, leaping away only when Naruto tried to tackle him to the ground. The dark haired boy was clearly surprised, but played along.

“Sasuke-ku-u-un~”

“You can do it, ‘ttebayo!” Naruto hollered as Sakura pushed a small amount of chakra into the soles of her feet, gaining some more speed than she was usually capable of.

She almost collided with Sasuke, but momentum carried her over his head as the boy ducked at the last second. Sakura landed on the ground unsteadily, her chakra sank too deep into the soil and her instincts (or rather Inner) took control of the body, sending her rolling to break the impact.

Naruto flashed past her once, twice, then a whole crowd of clones appeared from the bushes on her right, howling with laughter, “Run, teme, run!” Strong tan hands hauled her upright, safely hidden
from any unwanted spectators by the sheer number of cheering blondes, and she was running again, Inner so close to the surface, she’d been almost spilling over the top.

“Sasuke-kun~ Wait for me~”

Kakashi-sensei entered the clearing without fanfare and the only reason Sakura noticed was because Sasuke feinted suddenly, changing the direction mid-leap, and she had to push her chakra into the trampled ground to escape the collision with a green flak vest in front of her. She stumbled back, apology already on her lips, but Naruto beat her to it.

“Sensei!” the blonde shouted, pointing at the wincing from the almost ear-piercing sound man. He choked on his own words then, staring at defying gravity and common sense spikes of silver forming not-quite-mohawk on Kakashi’s head instead of usual messy mop. It looked so out of place that it actually made him forget about jōnin’s late arrival. “You look funny,” he said instead as his pale brows knitted into a grimace of suspicion. “Did you stick your fingers in a socket or what?”

“Naruto!” Sakura hissed, trying to ignore Inner’s howling laughter and her own twitching lip.

"Maa, you see, my cute cute little genin…” Sensei took a dramatic pause before his eye crinkled in a smile, “Fūton turned out to be a poor substitute to the hairdryer.”

Man, isn’t it so-o-o hardcore~ Inner squealed almost turning into a mental puddle.

Ugh, talk about fangirls.

Sasuke groaned, rolling his eyes at Sakura’s left and she shuddered from the very idea of using a wind jutsu for that. Naruto turned thoughtful, but there was a gleam in his blue eyes that promised nothing but mischief.

Danger alarms went off in Sakura’s mind. She didn’t ever, ever want to know what Naruto could come up with and oh shit wasn’t fūton his element? Sensei just kept smiling, but Sakura caught a glimpse of something akin to unadulterated horror in his eye. He must have heard of blonde boy’s prankster reputation.

“Alright,” the man said in a clipped voice, eyeing Naruto warily, “I hope you did your stretches, kids. Time to suffer.” Before any of them scrambled for an answer, sensei’s hands came alive.

The handseals, Rat-Horse-Dog-Snake, were followed by a soft whisper Shichidōchū and seven pillars of condensed earth rose from the ground in the distance, tall and thick. Two were partially hidden in the bushes, one divided a small stream crossing the training ground and others grew directly from the grass, uprooting it in the process.

That one looks like Akame-obaasan~, Inner snorted at the pillar with a long green tail swinging from its top.

I want to learn this jutsu, Sakura thought in awe, ignoring her counterpart. Imagine smashing the enemy from below with this!

But Kakashi-sensei’s hands didn’t stop their movements.

Dōkimoto, the wind carried, as Sakura stared at the quick sequence of Snake-Ox-Tiger-Snake-Boar-Rat, today much slower so her eyes managed to register the handsigns. Sasuke swallowed soundly and the girl spared him a quick glance to make sure that, yes, he was tracking sensei’s motions with
his Sharingan. *That would come in handy when we break this jutsu down,* she thought. Now if, but when. He had casted both techniques in one blurry motion yesterday, so now it was a show. A lesson.

The sheer number of handseals needed for the technique was astounding, because most only needed from one to three, maximum four to activate. More handseals meant opportunities for more concentrated chakra or, Sakura would bet, this time it was customisation purposes. As in there were base seals, but sensei could actually adjust the technique for his needs through the additional ones. At least that's what she thought Kushina-sama’s notes implied.

*Think he created this one?~* Inner murmured, watching the man hawkishly. Sakura sent her a wave of thoughtful agreement, too busy trying to memorize the sequence.

Next one actually was the one she heard sensei pronounce yesterday - *Kyūmenkyō no sakkaku, Optic Illusion of... Spherical Mirrors?* The handseal sequence was even longer, eight elements! Sakura's jaw dropped as her hands unconsciously repeated the seals - Tiger-Dragon-Boar-Ram-Ram-Dragon-Ox-Rabbit - but the green of her eyes was focused on the genjutsu barrier rising above them.

It looked like a silvery shimmering dome that started as a tall wall connecting the pillars, then grew up-up-up, crawling towards the sky against the laws of nature until the edges of the barrier slowly, almost gently stitched together. The dome vibrated once, a single ripple through its surface came and surged underground, telling Sakura that it was indeed a sphere. And then everything settled.

The sun filtered through the branches of Hashirama trees, casting shadows on the ground as if there was nothing to hinder it.

“Analysis?” Kakashi-sensei demanded, breaking Sakura away from awed stupor caused by witnessing the most complicated area protection she had seen in her life. She glanced at the boys nervously, but neither gobsmacked Naruto, nor equally stupefied Sasuke offered any input, so the girl bit the inside of her cheek, shaking off the desire to tackle the jōnin and beg him to accept her apprenticeship right away. She could learn so much from Kakashi-sensei! But that should wait until she had become someone worthy, someone strong and smart enough to matter.

“The first was doton based ninjutsu. I don’t know why you need a special jutsu - *Seven Earth Pillars,* was it? - when you could just use Stone Pillars. Probably is has something to do with the second technique. The second though…” she began uncertainly. Something flickered in Sakura's peripheral vision where one of the pillars stuck out from the ground.

*The grandma pillar~,* came Inner's snicker, but the girl paid it no mind, narrowing her eyes instead. There was a seal on the base of the column made of compressed earth. It was too far away for Sakura to make out any details or the kanji acting as the key, but she decided to extrapolate.

“Ah. That must be some sort of fūinjutsu. Premade?” the girl squinted at her sensei, looking for any reaction, positive or negative, just any. It was the first time she actually acted on the knowledge she had learned from her aunt's and Kushina-sama's notes.

Kakashi-sensei's grey brow rose up as if telling her ‘is it me you're asking?’ and Sakura pursed her lips. He was *testing* her. But wait! There was no way either Sasuke or Naruto had access to information on something as advanced as barrier genjutsu or B-rank fūinjutsu. Those weren't exactly in Academy curriculum. He was testing *her.*

She took a breath and soldiered on.

“Second one is a premade fūinjutsu tied to handseals. It is possible you placed the actual design yesterday when you slammed the ground…” she made a pause, considering an idea Inner threw at
her. “Yes, you must have placed the actual seal yesterday and just activated in now, which means you can use the fist two techniques in a combination and only the third needs actual handseals.” Sensei hummed noncommittally, but Sakura decided to ignore his lack of response.

“Dōkimoto must have three or four seals tied to the key and the rest regulates adjustable parameters, possibly strength of the seal, number, radius and so on. The name - Synchronization Source - supposes it acts as a baseline for a genjutsu, levelling the chakra bouncing between the pillars.”

“Whoa, Sakura-chan! You know a lot about this stuff!” Naruto wondered aloud, but Sasuke elbowed him in the ribs.

“Shut up, dobe!”

“Ow!” The blonde boy flinched and moved to retaliate, but soundlessly this time. Sasuke rolled his eyes in exasperation, catching him in the headlock easily, but the fight didn’t go any further.

Sakura hid a snicker by clearing her throat and turned back to sensei, hoping no one would comment how her cheeks pinked at Naruto’s sincere praise. Of course it probably didn’t worth much since he barely understood half of the stuff she had said, but still… it felt nice to be acknowledged.

“So, the third technique.” It was at least B or possibly A-rank, judging by the feeling of it, not really affecting Sakura in any way, but still lying heavy on her shoulders like a cloak. “It’s a barrier type genjutsu, seal based. Visual, possibly aural too. It really creates a sphere, so even if someone tries to sneak on us from the underground, they still be affected. You had said the pillars themselves are barrier yesterday, Kakashi-sensei, but it seems they're only the setup for the shape and radius. Like the wire inside paper lanterns,” she added for Naruto’s sake, who looked honestly befuddled.

There was a moment of silence when Sakura searched for something substantial to augment her analysis, but nothing came to mind. The boys were still staring at her and sensei was unreadable, so as the seconds went, she couldn't help but feel her left eye twitch nervously. Did she mess up? Oh, she shouldn't have corrected him! Oh gods, she messed up!

“You know, Kakashi, when Pak said you're making women weak in the knees, I thought they were ought to be older,” a muffled voice came from the underground all of sudden and Sakura nearly bolted.

“You'd think the reasons would be different too,” another voice, low and lazy, sounded from… sensei’s stomach?

Sakura gulped nervously, her mind whirring. Was there another component to the genjutsu? Was she caught up in it? Would kai be enough? Her eyes were darting from the jōnin before her to the boys at her left and she almost raised her hands to try for a release seal when sensei finally took a step forward and and ruffled her hair affectionately, his trademark smile warm and sunny.

“Very good, Sakura-chan,” he said and the remnants of his coldly-absent persona melted away.

“You heard everything, boys?”

They nodded stiffly, still not used to the way Kakashi-sensei could switch between his ANBU and, uh, not-ANBU selves (Sakura knew she had an Inner shaped advantage here). The man patted their heads too then, ignoring their wary stares, and ordered, “I want you to memorize these techniques. I won't be always there to put up a cover for your training, so by the end of the month the three of you must be able to raise the pillars, then we can talk about missions.” Usual ’or else’ went unsaid.

Then he took a step back and carefully tugged the zipper on his vest down until a scrunched face of a
brown-furred pug showed up between the layers of the thick green material.

“Oi, pups,” the pug said and snorted when Sakura swallowed down a squeal. Almost swallowed anyway. It wasn't *that* loud.

“A do-o-og~” the girl mouthed, her eyes suddenly so bright with excitement Kakashi couldn't help but chuckle. *Liked her for a reason.*

“Come out, boys,” he ordered, letting a slight growl reverb in his throat just to mess with the kids a little more. They deserved some fun before the things got serious. They would soon.

Naruto actually squeaked when the ground gave way and five dogs leaped at the genin from all sides. Sasuke's barely faded sharingan bloomed once again as his hand jerked to the weapon pouch. Sakura, on the other hand, bit her lip to hold back another ‘a do-o-og~’ and peered at him with that look again. The one he had gotten on a receiving end of yesterday when he told her he'd taken part in building of her home. The *scary* one.

“Oof, a fangirl?” Pakkun nudged Kakashi lightly, his gruff voice laced with good humor.

“Sensei, you have ninken!” The girl blinked away some of the daze surprisingly fast and bowed to the pug, then to the other dogs who ambled to stand at Kakashi's feet. “I'm Haruno Sakura, nice to meet you!” she actually *chirped*, clearly way too excited to control her emotions.

“And these are-“ she grasped both boys by the collars, untangling Sasuke’s chokehold on Naruto with one efficient shake, and bent them forcefully in a semblance of a bow too, “my teammates, Uzumaki Naruto and Uchiha Sasuke. Come on, be polite!” The last part she hissed, effectively snapping both Naruto and Sasuke out of it.

The boys obliged, murmuring their ‘yoroshiku’, but Kakashi could see their confusion. There had been an Inuzuka in their year (Tsume’s son, was he?) so they ought to know what ninken were, but a trained pack clearly differed from one tiny pup and not only in size.

“This is Pakkun,” the jōnin offered as an introduction. The pug jumped down, almost disappearing in the grass, and trotted towards the genin leisurely. Kakashi barely fought away a smile threatening to grow too lopsided to be hidden by his mask at the sight of Sakura bowing again earnestly.

There was a hint, a shadow of something Gai-like in her behaviour. Surprisingly, she - civilian-raised - was much more prepared for such meeting than Naruto or Sasuke. There was a definite abundance of formality in her words, but she seemed it her element, even if a little bit too reverent. Maybe she just loved dogs? Or there was a story here.

“You’ve made quite an impression on Guruko with your morning run, pinkie,” Pakkun snorted, but not unkindly and nodded at the young beagle with yellowish fur and dark markings on the flapping wildly ears. “He’ll be the one watching over you.”

The youngster yipped happily, “Hi!”

Sakura’s eyes widened a fraction as she took in the news, but she took it in stride. “Ah, thank you, Pakkun-san. Guruko-san,” she bowed once more, piling questions making her eyes go three shades darker as she no doubt conversed with her Inner.

The air shifted as two dogs moved forward, one confidently, the other carefully looking at the ground under his paws. “I’m Akino and this one over here is Ūhei.” Blue eyes of the pack’s genjutsu
specialist blinked at Naruto over the dark-stained glasses, “We’re going to make sure you don’t run into too much trouble, kid.” Ūhei inclined his bandaged head in greetings, but kept silent.

“Uh, hello?” The blonde boy shifted uncertainly, but the moment of indecision passed as if it was never here - Naruto crouched in front of smirking akita inu and demanded, “Why you’d be watching me, huh? I can take care of myself! I’m a ninja, ‘ttebayo!” He tried to stare Akino down, which only made the dog to bark out a laugh.

“A ninja in an orange jumpsuit? Cocky much?”

“Naruto, please….” Sakura groaned, kneeling helplessly beside Guruko (who immediately seized an opportunity and flashed onto her lap), as the boy shouted ‘then catch me if you can!’ and darted off in the direction of the wooden posts on the far side of the barrier.

*An entirely fruitless attempt to be honest*, Kakashi chuckled and turned away.

With Naruto busy dodging Akino’s playful nips at his heels and Sakura handing out belly rubs to extatic Guruko, faintly amused Pakkun and looming over her Bull (whose only introduction was licking the girl’s cheek sloppily once), his eye was barely cracked open and from under the grey eyelashes the jōnin tracked Sasuke’s careful movements. The boy traded his impractically white cargo shorts for a pair of black standard-issue pants this time, into one pocket of which was stuffed a take out box. It smelled of dango and anxiety.

Kakashi was very interested in how the boy would react to his new escort and the Uchiha didn’t disappoint him.

Sasuke dropped on one knee in front of Bisuke, without any difficulty identifying the leader of the two dogs that followed him through Konoha. “It is an honor,” he said almost officially and Kakashi winced. The pup was a splitting image of his mother for a brief second - same quiet determination, same haunted, solemn expression. Uchihas rarely contracted any summons, but they had held those who did and their companions in high regard.

“A honor indeed,” the oldest in the pack dog nodded sagely. Not that it meant the spaniel was *old*, because ninken of Hamaya Castle didn’t age the way ordinary dogs do, but of all Kakashi’s summons he was the most experienced. “My name is Bisuke, my partner for this mission is Urushi,” he said barely sparing a sandy vallhund at his right a glance.

The silence stretched uncomfortably as Sasuke and Urushi studied each other, the former with interest, the latter with badly hidden smirk. “Your fur is atrocious, Uchiha,” the vallhund bared his teeth in a sharp grin in the end, “I don’t get what those fangirls of yours see in you.”

Kakashi wanted to facepalm - give it to Urushi to start the conversation with an insult.

“Ah, but that makes two of us,” Sasuke smirked instead of getting offended. He clearly hadn’t been fed with clan bullshit about appearances and honor when it came to hair for too long for it to take roots (if Kakashi hadn’t known it was a thing first hand, he’d never believe there had been more than twenty shinobi duels over who wore a particular type of braid best). “Please, don’t worry, Urushi-san of Inuzuka,” the boy continued practically glowing with sarcasm, “I’m nothing compared to your *rugged* looks. I’d gladly trade those harpies to you. Have them all.”

Urushi growled lowly at the implied insult but Bisuke ignored him, rising to come closer to Sasuke. For once he was actually interested. Kakashi had no idea how the boy knew the vallhund’s mother was an Inuzuka, but then… he kind of told it to anyone willing to listen. Bisuke seemed to have everything under control, so the jōnin opted for silently watching the exchange.
“Just how good is your hearing, Uchiha-kun?” the spaniel inquired, cocking his head to the side and pinning Sasuke to the ground with a heavy stare. The boy opened his mouth to answer, but suddenly rolled to the side, narrowly missing Naruto’s knee in the head as the blonde jumped over him in yet another attempt to get away from Akino.

“Blink!” Uzumaki hollered, turning gracefully mid-jump. His fingers formed clone seal and next moment Sakura twisted, dislodging the dogs from her lap, planted her palms into the ground and somersaulted over the Bull, descending on Sasuke in a flash of crimson and pink.

“What…? he wheezed, smothered into the grass by her body. Then white clouds of smoke filled the clearing and it was littered with shouting Narutos. They zeroed on plowing through the crowd Akino with renewed enthusiasm. “Oh,” Sasuke muttered into Sakura’s abdomen, the push of familiar chakra washing over him in a tidal wave, “thanks.”

“We need proper signs,” the girl waved off his apology and grunted, rolling off him. She punched one of the nearby clones in frustration. “That’s his automatic response to everything! Well, at least he had some decency to warn us.”

“I can take it,” Sasuke demurred, not looking at her or orange stricken field. “You guys don’t need to coddle me.”

“It is n-no ‘coddling’, young Uchiha, when the team takes care of its wounded,” Ūhei admonished him, appearing visibly out of nowhere and sniffing boy’s clenched fists full of uprooted grass. “You are distressed and your adrenaline levels are too elevated. Alpha,” he sighed and turned to Kakashi, rubbing his bandaged snout nervously, “I kn-now you do n-not take it lightly, but I advise counselling before the problem festers an-ny further.”

Oh well, Kakashi knew. What Ūhei didn’t say, ‘you need it too’, but the hound was too smart not to mention that part. The problem - real problem with no solution - was that Kakashi couldn’t in sane mind trust anyone to pick Sasuke’s brains now. Not with the amount of the forbidden knowledge the boy carried, because most shinobi shrinks were - what a coincidence - T&I members or, even worse, Yamanakas. Not that Kakashi had anything against the latter. Eh, there were so many nots in his life since later...

There was only two members of T&I Kakashi trusted almost implicitly (his paranoia notwithstanding), but he didn’t want to bring Teri into this and Anko wouldn’t be his first choice for Sasuke to talk his issues out with. Not the second too, not even close. If his pocket Uchiha would turn into constantly horny Hyūga lover… No, he won’t even imagine it.

But Enka actually wasn’t such a bad idea, with her background and all. Tenrō was probably even certified, to think of that.

“I’d rather not,” Sasuke said dully.

“Too dangerous,” Sakura seconded, apparently having the same chain of thought as Kakashi regarding village therapists. Much good it did her. She stood up, brushed her dress before tugging it off to stay in black leggins and t-shirt, and offered Sasuke a hand. “We’d deal with it ourselves. As a team.”

The boy looked up at her, dark eyed and miserable in his vulnerability. “I’ll only drag you all dawn, Haruno. I… can’t just forget and move on.”

“But no one asks you to! We’ll work around it, ‘ttebayo!” Naruto’s shrill voice rang from the direction of the creek. The blonde, soaking wet almost up to the waist, jogged towards the group
with panting Akino hanging over his shoulders like a furry shawl. Seemed like that famous ability to rip through genjutsu went down the line or (Kakashi really tried not to think of it too hard) the Kyūbi manipulated boy’s chakra to untangle Akino’s weave. The dog looked exhausted.

“Dobe…” Sasuke rolled his eyes at Uzumaki’s antics, or maybe at Naruto’s everpresent optimism, but there was almost fondness hidden in his grumble. He took Sakura’s hand, awkwardly scratched Ūhei behind the ear in gratitude and looked around.

His teammates both were smiling, Naruto - like there was nothing dark in the world, Sakura - exasperated. Kakashi was too, but wistfully, because no matter how much he wanted peace and quiet, it never lasted. The pack sat around the humans in a loose circle with older dogs holding a silent conversation in low growls and younger… Well, Guruko was staring at boy’s pocket hopefully. Sasuke must have seen it, because he smirked weakly and pulled the take away box out.

“Anybody wants dango?”

Sakura’s life turned into a survival horror movie. If that was even a genre, Kakashi-sensei could probably become filthy rich by selling his regimen as a script. Since the day he introduced Team Seven to his summons, as Inner aptly put it, shit got really wild.

Sakura rose before sunrise to pen down some notes for Naruto, who proved hopeless at studying via Academy recommended materials, but soaked up information like a sponge when Sakura or Sasuke read it to him out loud and answered his fucking questions.

“Oh gods, I swear, I want to punch our Academy staff so hard they bend over backwards!” she hissed when it became apparent that the blonde had very obscure ideas of what most teachers except for Iruka-sensei and Nanagusa-sensei had taught them. Those two apparently had overdeveloped sense of justice and tried to stuff knowledge into Naruto’s mind out of spite to the orders from ‘above’. Not that they were supposed to know it, Kakashi-sensei’s tongue just slipped once, then the man glared the three of them down into the promise of silence with his medium-dark with a side of bloodthirsty ANBU glare (Inner was particularly fond of that one).

Mostly Sakura was angry at herself though, because while teachers’ mistreatment of Naruto had been systematic and silently condoned by the morons-in-charge, her (fuck it, their whole class) ignorance hadn’t helped either. That was how Naruto ended up with no inkling of knowledge of first aid or projectile physics whatsoever, but had the entire Konoha mapped in his head for escape routes.

So, mornings were for preps and cooking both breakfast and bentos for lunch.

Around six forty Naruto usually dropped in, covered by Akino’s genjutsu while Ūhei made sure whoever kept watch on her blonde teammate was following his clone. Some more clones assisted Sakura with cooking, more out of curiosity than because she needed help, and Naruto listened to mom explain and show calligraphy to him.

Sasuke came at seven am sharp, braided her hair while lecturing Naruto on everything he knew about clan politics and together they mulled over the failed mission reports Kakashi-sensei started to give them. Sakura suspected he graciously ‘appropriated’ the papers from Mission Desk, but had decided not to ask to keep her plausible deniability intact. Inner had a field day with shredding bad grammar in some of the reports to pieces.

They ate at quarter to eight, filling the open-planned kitchen with Naruto's and mom's chatter, and then darted away from Haruno residence to the Training Ground that had slowly become their
second home.

At first boys took separate ways and Sakura went to the Training Ground Three by the roofs with Guruko frolicking excitedly by her side. Then Naruto used his clones to cut the time spent on learning tree-walking, calibrating his chakra control somewhat in the process and constantly getting on Sasuke's nerves with sheer numbers of his copies assaulting every available tree except for the one Uchiha claimed as his (Sakura got hugs every time kage bunshin had been used, so she wasn't the one to protest).

“They’re bickering like a married couple,” Akino had stage-whispered at some point, which led to another shouting session followed by an all out catch game that Team Seven won (because you can't run away when the field is filled with Narutos). It took them some more time, but by the fifth day of the rigorous training both boys finally got confident enough to follow Sakura through the roofs, henged as a group of unremarkable chūnin.

They got to their clearing by the wooden posts at about half past eight and dedicated an hour to warm up exercises and running which Sakura gradually came to love.

It was liberating in a way, to sprint through the forest surrounding the training ground with her boys and Kakashi-sensei’s ninken guarding them from the intruders and unwanted spectators. She had started slow, barely managing a good five kilometers sprint and finishing last, panting from exertion and soaking with sweat. But her muscles eventually adjusted to the new regimen, aching, but not making Sakura swallow angry tears as Naruto piggyback carried her to the meeting point with sensei. Ah, well, sensei…

Even though the official training hours for Team Seven were from nine to the last standing genin faceplanting into the grass, Kakashi-sensei didn't appear until eleven am. The world of pain he promised Sakura? He hadn't been kidding.

Taijutsu training was a gruesome affair and, while Sasuke was not that bad and Kurama-sama took care of Naruto, Sakura's body quickly turned into one big bruise. She ached all over. Every part of her pulsed with pain from pulled muscles and scraped by missed attacks and unsuccessful dodges skin. Every evening Ūhei healed the worst of it and next morning she stepped into the circle again. Neither Sasuke, nor Naruto didn't hold back for her sake, but truth be told she never expected them to.

They hadn’t been training to learn some fancy moves, no. One simple rule sensei drilled in their heads in the span of two days: “Either you enter the circle with the intent to fight for your life, or you will lose it.” And Sakura had too much to lose to be careless or wallow in self-pity.

When on the sixth day of training Kakashi-sensei grudgingly accepted their Academy-style taijutsu as ‘worth a stunted ten-year-old’, Naruto clung to him like a barnacle until the man gave up and agreed to show them some less overused katas he had copied from other shinobi. If that wasn't one of most disastrous ideas of the blue-eyed menace, then Sakura didn't know what was. She ended up with a sprained ankle and a very uncomfortable bruise forming on the left side of her face where she faceplanced into the wooden post after tripping on the last dog of sensei’s pack - Shiba.

He had returned to the pack briefly as his target had left the village on a mission. He watches over someone too, sensei’s friend probably~, Inner mused and Sakura had been inclined to agree with her - Kakashi-sensei was no doubt a dangerous and powerful person, but he also turned out to be extremely protective of his team.
He must be the same towards his friends too, she figured and returned to perfecting her moves after Ūhei stopped the swelling.

Taijutsu mornings were the worst, but when her body refused to move anymore (and she was lasting longer every day), sensei announced lunch time and the genin trio dropped onto the ground like ragdolls. They ate in companionable silence, watching Guruko, the sweet and always happy to be of help beagle train under Bisuke’s strict control.

He was fast, agile and unbelievably young as Pakkun explained at some point. Rare ninken left Hamaya Castle - the realm where dog summons lived since well before elemental countries had even been formed - until they reached the end of their first decade. Guruko, it turned out, was only four.

Sakura couldn’t but feel inspired by the small dog who trained earnestly and gave all her dedication to becoming stronger too.

While Sasuke was busy being pummeled into every available surface by Kakashi-sensei in a horribly devastating but nevertheless effective dodge training aimed to teach Uchiha the control of his dōjutsu, she and Naruto sent barrages of every projectile they had at hand in the direction of constantly moving clones of their sensei. Sakura came to be quite confident with kunai: she slowly began letting Inner take over their reflexes as she ran equations in her head, adjusting the angle, power of the throw and amount of chakra needed for enhanced speed in split seconds. Naruto’s aim, on the other hand, was still sloppy, but it had to do with the sheer amount of clones he sent to do chakra control exercises in parallel with their training.

Akino took a great joy in popping every clone that faltered and dropped the leaf from its forehead or did something else equaling to losing control. Urushi, the young punk with a mean streak aimed at anything Sasuke-shaped, picked on the banter between Naruto and his mission target and usually played on Naruto’s side just out of spite.

Around three pm they took another break, Sakura, sensei and Sasuke taking turns at yet another ‘stuff Naruto’s head with important knowledge’ session while finishing their bentos. Sometimes (Sakura suspected it had to do with nightmares he didn’t quite deny but refused to talk about) Sasuke brought sweets to share.

They talked about everything from chakra theory (both boys sucked, though Sasuke shamelessly used his sharingan to put the theory to the test and dropped with exhaustion on the fifth day after staring at Naruto’s seal for too long) to reasons for jutsu being ranked from E to SS (and no, she didn’t sulk when it became crystal clear she won’t ever be able to pull Tajū Kage Bunshin off with her reserves). They argued about the application of poisons in close combat - three against one in favor of mild paralytics and Sakura could swear sensei had been as dumbstruck as she by Naruto’s sudden advocating for the high grade toxins. Then she remembered his Kyūbi enhanced regeneration, which, king of explained things. Thankfully, Naruto was somewhat versed in smoke tags only or it could end deadly for the mobs hunting him on regular basis.

Sensei also promised to bring in kenjutsu after he was sure they won’t stab each other accidentally, but there was something deadly serious in his eye. Like there was a story here and it hadn’t ended well.
At four pm the fun part began, at least for Sakura. The boys went back to chakra control exercises and she worked on figuring out sensei's Shichidōchū no jutsu. It was a doton technique what made it her specialty, but knowing you have an affinity, as it turned out, didn't automatically equal to being able to perform the jutsu. So she spent hours laying on the flattened by the earlier chaos grass, trying to find the way for her chakra to connect to the earth underneath.

It happened slowly. The power that ran through Sakura's chakra system pulsed steadily to the rhythm of her heart, to her very own rhythm. It circulated through every tenketsu with a thrum familiar as breathing, ready to bend to Sakura's will and so alive. But the ground under her relaxed palms was alive too.

Deep below and somewhere to the left and far away to her right there was another cadence, mighty but unhurried. The beats were so far in between, Sakura would probably miss it if not for the way it resonated with her slowly beating heart. She stilled, breathing deeper to maintain her concentration and sinking further into the state of detached clarity. The breath of the earth cocooned her, cutting all unnecessary sounds away and suddenly Sakura knew: there was no such thing as the ground. It was controlled chaos.

Fertile soil was pierced by countless roots, rodents lairs and even old bones. The stones - shrapnel from jutsu went wrong and big enough to squish an adult - were shadows in her perception as she sank lower and deeper, bypassing pliant clay and unyielding sand, past groundwater that sang to her until she could only sense solid rock. It was the source of rhythmic pulsation, hiding something too hot and powerful and way too incomprehensible in its core.

Sakura clung to it, but a distant rumble - like a thunderstorm shadowing the horizon - caught her attention.

She slid closer and was suddenly assaulted with a premonition.

A vast human made labyrinth was sprawling underneath her, crawling along the Nakagawa's underground streams to the Konoha Wall, reaching up to the Hokage Mountain and beyond. It was dark and empty, an unfilled void of nothingness and the very earth did not like it, rejecting the intrusion and slowly but surely crumbing the walls of the corridors. Then something vile-destructive-alien surged through it, a wave of killing intent so intense she almost fainted, and Sakura choked on the bile in her throat.

She grasped at the grass helplessly as the connection snapped, leaving her blind and deaf to anything but her stuttering heartbeat for a moment. Then strong, big hands in fingerless gloves covered her trembling ones and a deep voice of Kakashi-sensei broke through the pounding in her ears.

“That’s why elemental techniques aren’t taught to genin. The knowledge of your limits comes with experience, but we don’t have such luxury as time, unfortunately.”

A wet nose poked Sakura's cheek and a rough but gentle tongue left a cool line of saliva on her forehead. It became easier to breathe and the girl murmured her thanks to a considerate Ūhei. Sensei waited for her to open way too light sensitive eyes and helped her sit up. Bull's heavy bulk appeared behind her and a huge dog let Sakura slump against him.

“I could warn you against diving in too deep of course, but I figured you wouldn't listen until you've tried and got burnt once.” Kakashi-sensei's words were steady, born from experience rather from the desire to see her hurt. “How far did you reach, Sakura-chan? Don't worry if it's not that deep yet. Most don't get past topsoil on their first try.”
“The labyrinth~” she panted in response, her eyes wide and wild. “Sensei, how come we have a fucking labyrinth full of evil~” Sakura jerked, biting her lip till she drew blood, pushing Inner back, away from the surface. “I'm so sorry, Kakashi-sensei! I didn't mean~”

But the man in front of her didn't react neither at Inner's sudden appearance, nor at Sakura's hasty apologies. He stared at her like he just saw a ghost, like he opened his eyes in the morning and there was a yokai in his bed sleeping peacefully next to him. Sakura made an aborted motion to wipe the blood trickling down her chin and as she tugged her fingers from sensei's, she noticed it.

His hands were shaking.

“Kakashi-sensei?” she whispered, unsettled. “What is that?”

He blinked and his features morphed into an emotionless mask, grey eye going cold and sharp.

“Never, you hear me, never tell anyone of what you've sensed. That's an order. If questioned, you've reached subsoil.”

Sakura nodded, startled by the sudden command.

His fingernails dug into her bruised skin, leaving half-moon shaped marks.

“Acknowledged,” she rasped, wincing from piercing pain, and suddenly it was over.

Sensei eye-smiled at her, looking somewhat apologetic and motioned for Ūhei to take care of her newly acquired injuries before they got infected or scarred. He let her hands go only to pat her neatly braided by Sasuke hair in an almost paternal gesture. “Get some rest, Sakura-chan, and try for Shichidōchū. You need to learn this sequence even more now. If someone finds out about your little peek, you'd be a bigger target than Sasuke.”

His heavy with urgency words clashed with the way he said them, but in a week Sakura had known Kakashi-sensei she learned to take his orders to heart even if he singsonged them. Especially if he did so. She watched him go to the wooden posts where boys were trying to rotate three leaves on their foreheads clockwise and the ones on their thumbs - counterclockwise. She snuggled into Bull's muscular body, suddenly too exhausted to move, Ūhei's head and whole Guruko slumped on her lap.

After fifteen minutes break she managed attune her chakra to the steady beat of the earth under her feet and transform in into doton with only a brief moment of hesitation. Sakura managed to raise seven pillars needed for sensei's barrier genjutsu on her second try.

When Pakkun joined her and the beagle on her way back home, she simply offered him a ride.

At six the alarm clock on the middle post tended to erupt into eardrum-shattering screeching and ruffled, worn out and overall wishing to be left to die in peace trio scuttled away into the shadows of the Training Ground Three trees. They never stopped moving because even a brief pause meant more pain than strained muscles, so they opted for darting from one hiding spot to another in the confines of Kyūmenkyō no Sakkaku, trying to foul the trail like three mad hares.

Survival training meant there were three of them against an ANBU captain with six loyal to death and beyond ninken at his side. Understandably, it never lasted more than twenty minutes (the first round), and number of rounds solely depended on when Sakura would fall and wouldn't be able to stand up anymore.
Consciously she knew she was the weakest when it came to physical prowess and, while Inner raged on the inside, Sakura used that fury as a fuel for another punch, another jump, another kawarimi. She ran and fought side by side with her boys, leading them, aiming their single-minded attacks into the right direction and knowing they would catch her when she's out.

She went home alone, but never truly - Guruko slinked in the shadows, silent and watchful. Pakkun joined her after that faithful bout of sensing Sakura wasn't ready to repeat and she felt the gravity of sensei’s words then.

Akino was a genjutsu weaver that covered Naruto's clones while the blonde spent his mornings at Harunos. Ūhei was a medic, but also a failsafe in case Naruto got ambushed by an angry mob and someone got hurt.

Urushi was a pure tracker and as far as Sakura gathered his main duty was to look out for people stalking Sasuke. That sort of explained vallhund’s disgust with Uchiha's fangirls: they elevated picking harmless girls (and some boys) from potential threat to a whole new level of mastery. And Bisuke was still a mystery to Sakura, but he clearly was the oldest and the wisest in the pack. Maybe he was a failsafe of sorts too.

She knew Kakashi-sensei gave 'Sakura watch’ to Guruko, the youngest of the pack and still in training because she was the least endangered - just a civilian girl with no real talent beyond being book smart. No one knew about her grandmother and relation to Naruto, she didn't have a treasured dōjutsu also. She had been safe. But not anymore.

As she dragged her feet home on the seventeenth of January after darkness had already set upon the village, Sakura couldn't help but wonder… Most of Team Seven's training had been brutal, but it was hardly focused on offensive. They'd been learning how to dodge and disappear, how to stall the enemy and break away from the pursuit. Even her first elemental jutsu was a part of heavy concealment sequence (it didn't mean she hadn't tried to use it against sensei but she preferred to forget about the wiping forest floor with her face that followed after).

Kakashi-sensei really was concerned with them being targeted by some unknown power that made itself comfortable in the shinobi heart of Fire Country. Were it the same people who got her grandmother killed? Worse, did the darkness she had felt rise in the labyrinth under Konoha have the same roots?

How much time did they have? And until what?

January 18th, year 2019 since the birth of the Sage of Six Paths

When you're a shinobi, days of the week stop being of matter because the only real measure of passing time turns out to be training and missions. So, when Friday the eighteenth came, Kakashi barely noticed the change. For him it was just another winter day he planned to spend watching his cute little genin grow into someone worthy of being called shinobi. Someone able to survive the incoming storm.

They changed so fast, much faster then he anticipated, even if his words said otherwise. Sasuke's sharingan had already shown first traces of future power and boy’s chakra control balanced out significantly. Naruto's attempts at not exploding a single leaf with his touch turned into an almost confident show of chakra manipulation too. It was nothing grand, but the boy said the Fox had been
helping him by keeping its chakra out. Kakashi had no idea if he should feel mortified or happy about the development, but Naruto learned better this way, it was evident, so he didn’t argue. Not like he could argue with the Nine-Tailed Beast.

Naruto - being one hundred percent Kushina’s son in his unpredictability - put his clones to the task of catching up with Sasuke, which was hilarious to watch because a horde of grumbling over notebooks or stripping whole branches of Hashirama trees off leaves blondes did leave an impression.

Then there was Sakura. When he had told her to master his Shichidōchū, it was more of a motivation or, he dared say, a challenge. But the girl, still far behind her teammates in physical department, pulled herself together and fucking went all sensor (almost giving Kakashi a heart attack in the process) and mastered the jutsu in less than a week instead of failing spectacularly. Maybe Naruto’s nindō of never giving up was contagious.

Maybe Kakashi needed more than Kyūmenkyō no Sakkaku to hide their progress.

He arrived to the Training Ground Three at his usual eleven after speaking with Obito and Rin briefly and stopped dead in his tracks at the sight of utterly still grass basking in the oppressive to his sensitive ears silence. The place was empty. Was it?

He crouched low and sniffed at the air, immediately picking up an earthly scent of his pink haired student. Since the day she let the connection with the very element establish (even if for a brief moment), her chakra began to adjust to the slow beat of the underground and her body did too. Sakura smelt like an adult shinobi now and it made it easier for Kakashi to find her, but it also meant Inuzukas would be able too, if ordered.

Smell concealment, the man thought in passing, adding another must-know to the very long list of tricks he intended to pass to his students. He had been working them into the ground the whole week, but tried very hard to consciously control his instinctive drive to train the genin like he had done his ANBU squad. Well fed and healthy, these words of Gai kept him from pushing kids too far and he couldn’t be more grateful to his energetic friend for the advice.

Kakashi was almost sure he had been doing what was best for the pups and they seemed eager to learn, even Sasuke started to abandon his gloomy Uchiha ways at the prospect of being able to track two targets with his sharingan at once. The jōnin concentrated team exercises on defense, knowing full well they won’t survive long enough to throw a single punch against the real enemy, but if they noticed, no arguments were raised. Still, here he was, cradling a naive, stupid spark of hope that they won’t all go down before he taught them how to...

Bull nudged him into the lower back and Kakashi let himself fall forward, breaking through the heavy net of genjutsu dome. It fought the intrusion, but recognized the creator of its seals and the man gracefully rolled to stand up in front of three pairs of expectant eyes.

“Hey, hey, Kaka-sensei! You’re almost on time today!” a ruffled Naruto cheered, catching Kakashi’s elbow and dragging him to where others stood. “We’ve already done all the warm ups, ran and did some taijutsu! We’re so ready, ‘ttebayo!”

“For what?” the jōnin asked in bemusement.

“For the mission!” all three stared at him reproachfully.
“Ah, I guess I did promise you a mission...” the man made a show of rubbing his chin, appearing to be deep in thoughts. Judging by Urushi’s derisive snort, he didn’t buy it. “But are you really ready for it?”

“If you’re asking whether we can continue to act like a love-struck fool, a total idiot and a hopeless moron, then yes. We’ve discussed it already,” Sasuke grumbled. Kakashi hummed, surprised by boy’s self-deprecating description, but then again Naruto and Sakura both received their portion of scorn too.

“We love you too, bitch~” the girl singsonged in a saccharine voice, then turned to Kakashi and spread her arms wide, “We did manage to activate your sequence, ne, sensei? Bisuke and Akino helped of course, but we did it. We can manage a D-rank.”

And who was he to go back on his word?

Mission Assignment Desk was a fitful affair.

A wide open-space with cream colored walls and creaking on its own wooden floor had been a place where all shinobi were equal despite rank and clan affiliation. Or equally screwed, which was a way better description.

“Teri-chan, do you see what I see?” a familiar voice came from one of the mahogany desks where a pair of no less familiar chūnin were sitting. One - dark eyed member of the Cryptography Division elbowed the other - the woman in her late twenties with her head buried in the romance novel even Kakashi considered trashy.

“What is it, Awayuki-cchi? You know I love this chapter!” The latter tore her eyes away from the page for a second, huffing in irritation. She blinked, assessing the genin in front of her and deliberately slo-o-owly looked up at the jōnin behind their backs. “Hmm. Oh, well, hello, Hatake-san! What brings you to our lair at this ungodly hour?! You finally decided to file in that report from October?”

Kakashi shuddered at the thought. He had no idea where the damned scroll could be by now. But before he could try for his usual bullshit reply, Naruto bounced on his heels and waved, “Nanagusa-sensei, you’re here!”

The kids seemed positivity delighted to meet her, even Sasuke retracted from his unsociable shell for long enough to murmur a polite greeting. It was slightly unsettling to see the trio brighten at the sight of a member of Intelligence Division, but, judging by the honorific Naruto used, Nanagusa Teri also taught at the Shinobi Academy. Not far to go, all things considered (Mission Assignment Desk had been located on the Academy premises. There also had been at least two entrances into T&I and one into the catacombs, thankfully sealed long ago).

The woman smiled at Naruto, curtly, but without a lingering taste of old hatred. ‘Must’ve been a Nara in the previous life’ Kurenai said about her once because Nanagusa was way too lazy (both for feeling any strenuous emotions and taking responsibility jōnin rank required). She must have had a lot on her hands in recent months, he wondered, because last time he’d seen her there had been much less grey in her complicated updo held together with sharp looking metal studs.

“Nanagusa-san, Rae-san,” Kakashi offered as a greeting in the end and was almost swept back into the door by a well-placed water bullet.
Rae Awayuki smirked at him with unhidden mirth and yelled for everyone in the room to hear, “Aww, look men, Hatake brought reinforcements! No reports from him today!” Muffled chuckles reached his ears from where Kamizuki was chilling with his feet on the desk. Someone wolf-whistled and there was the sound of ryō trickling from one hand to another, accompanied by unhappy grumble ‘shit, could he take the team next year?’

Kakashi fucking hated Mission Assignment hell and its ass-crazy chūnin. They had too much power over him now to do anything but stand still and stare at the ceiling, ignoring the spectacle in front of him as Rae leaned onto her elbows and winked at his genin.

Nope, they were on their own in here.

“Hello, kids! How’s the team building going?”

Uhh…

“Have you started at least one fire by now?”

They broke seven Hashirama trees and leveled a small hill instead.

“Should we start cowering in fear you guys explode something?”

Please, don’t give them ideas!

“Awayuki-cchi! Don't give them ideas!” Nanagusa admonished her colleague, trying to smack her with a book. Said book suddenly broke free from woman’s hold and scuttled away on six thin paper legs. “Aww, man, thanks… I just bought this copy yesterday…”

“So what do you lot want?” Rae asked his team ignoring the grumbling on her left as only someone with years of practice could.

The book took a detour behind Izumo’s table and cautiously approached Kakashi, flapping its cover like wings. He stared at it warily. The book wiggled.

“A mission!” Naruto whooped excitedly, “Give us the coolest mission you have!”

“Please”, Sakura added hastily just as Sasuke’s brow started twitching.

“Please, Nanagusa-sensei,” he rasped as if it burned his throat. ‘Save me’ had been left unsaid, but it was evident in the tense line of his shoulders.

The book stood on its hind legs (?) and tried to climb Kakashi’s foot like a clingy cat. He almost caved. It looked cute.

“Ah, Teri-chan, they want a cool mission,” Rae cooed, wiggling her fingers in Kakashi’s direction. Climbing attempts grew bolder and the chūnin went on, “Can't give such a nice team a simple dog walking. They said please after all.”

“No, we absolutely can't,” grey eyed woman smirked, twirling a silver twig-shaped ring on her thumb idly. She studied Kakashi and his team for a moment and leaned back, balancing on the back legs of her chair to yell in the direction of the open door leading to the archives. “Hagane, you still have that mission open?”

“Who's the pour soul you're giving it to?” came a muffled reply and a man in his twenties with a bandage across his nose barreled out of the archive in a cloud of dust. “Oh no, Rae, you don’t-” he
blanched like chalk at the sight of a stubborn hardcover crawling up Kakashi’s left leg and made an attempt to flee the room, but the door was slammed shut from the inside right in his face.

“Yeah, them,” Rae nodded at Kakashi’s team with a badly concealed glee. “Can't wait to read those mission reports, man.”

The book wiggled again on his hip, four of its legs holding onto Kakashi’s pants as the front pair strained to reach for his hanging limply hand.

“Hey, hey!” Naruto jumped in his place impatiently, unable to wait any longer or at least making a good show out of it just to stay in character, “Nanagusa-sensei, Rae-san, what's the mission? Come on, tell us!”

“You see, Uzumaki-kun, there's a house in Konoha uptown that is marked for sale for three months already,” the greying woman explained, sharing another wicked smile with her colleague, “but no one agrees to buy it. Your mission objective is to make it liveable.”

“What is the reason for shinobi intervention?” Sasuke asked sharply, suspicion clear in his voice.

“Ah, you see…” chūnins flashed him two toothy grins and chorused, “the house is haunted!”

His kids blanched and the book, for the lack of a better word, leaped. It landed into Kakashi’s automatically outstretched hand with a pulse of chakra and the paper under his fingers bulged. A small puff of white smoke and Naruto’s yelp later there was a D-rank mission scroll in his hand.

“What-” the blonde began, his shrill voice rising into ultrasound frequencies, but Kakashi wasn’t going to stay in this cursed place any longer. He grabbed the pups by their collars and shunshined away, leaving hysterical laughter of at least five chūnin behind. He was so done with this place.

Kakashi truly hated Mission Assignment Desk with a burning passion.

The door of the Yamanaka Flower shop slid closed after another satisfied customer and a smiling teenager with a platinum blonde ponytail swinging well past her waist groaned, folding her hands on the counter.

“Why can’t we all have a cool sensei, dad?” she whined dejectedly in continuation of their interrupted discussion.

“And Asuma isn’t ‘cool’ by your standards, darling? He was one of the Twelve Guardians, you know,” Inoichi admonished her, taking the vase of yellow irises from a big delivery box and placing it on a window stand. He turned the vase so the most vibrant flowers were facing the street and made a mental note to thank Tenzō for his impeccable timing - in cloudy winter time bright flowers always sold like hot cakes.

“But Asuma-sensei is almost as lazy as Shikamaru!”

“And whom your majesty approves of then?” Inoichi asked with a chuckle. “Pass me those buttercups, sunshine.”

The girl vaulted over the counter with an easy grace of a clan kid trained from her very childhood. “Ranunculus asiaticus,” she hummed in approval of the rich burgundy bulbs, “charm and attraction... I think Hinata’s sensei is okay. She beat Kiba after he ran away chasing a stray cat instead of painting the fence.” Nimble fingers traced gentle petals in a feathery light caress and the girl placed
the flowers in another vase.

“Kurenai-san is quite famed shinobi, that is true.” Inoichi adjusted the irises one last time and accepted the buttercups from his daughter. “But she is a genjutsu master, her skills won’t add to Ino-Shika-Cho formation.”

“Well then,” Ino’s face turned sour like she tasted a lemon, “Sakura’s sensei must be something too.”

Inoichi threw a look at her reflection in the windowsill. She was picking at the hem of her purple shirt furiously, clearly unhappy with something. Inoichi had never been the one to pry, but that was… uncalled for. “You think?”, he inquired neutrally, carefully clearing his expression of a frown that threatened to settle in.

“I haven’t heard from her since graduation and she’s never home! I stopped by!” And if his daughter’s sullen face didn’t ring any bells at first, now Inoichi kind of knew where it was going. The girls made a good show of being at each other’s throats lately, but he had been aware of their fake spat. Ino probably expected them to give up the pretense by now since they had nothing to compete over anymore.

Haruno Sakura ended up in one team with Uchiha boy and Uzumaki kid - what else could he ask for when he had worked so long to make it happen? If Ino wanted to renounce her rivalry with the girl, he wasn’t the one to argue. It suited his mission just fine.

“And if she’s never home, she must be training hard! I bet Hatake-san can teach her something cool!” his daughter continued grumbling, completely missing a calculating look in her father’s eyes. “I’ve seen your bingo book, dad! A Copy-Nin, really! Sakura is probably having a field day wheedling all the cool jutsu from him while I. Am. Stuck. With. This!” She threw her hands in the air helplessly, glaring holes in the photo of her own team that had been pushed in the farther corner of the shop. “This isn’t Ino-Shika-Cho, this is A JOKE!”

“Now, now, no need to be so rude, sunshine,” Inoichi sighed and pulled her into a hug. “It all will work out, you just need to give them a chance.”

“More like a million…” Ino exhaled tiredly, trumping her forehead into his chest for good measure.

“Maybe a million,” he nodded solemnly. “All will be fine, darling. I can ask around for the training field Team Seven uses if you want. So you can go talk with Sakura.”

Of course everyone older than twenty knew the number of said field, but Inoichi just wanted to give his child some more time to figure everything by herself (while being a supportive father went unsaid). Again, she was the daughter of the Head of the Analysis Division, it wouldn’t do if she couldn’t gather that information herself.

“It’s Training Ground Three,” Ino shook her head and took a step back to return to the counter. “But it was empty when I came there today. Maybe they just have a mission.”

Well, Inoichi doubted a mission of Team Seven could go past him. Ah, questions-questions. “Might as well,” he agreed and straightened his shoulders to ease the tingling feeling at the base of his skull. Someone, definitely shinobi, was coming his way. “Seems like I'm going to be summoned, sunshine.”

“I’ve got it covered, dad,” she shot him a wide smile and made a shooing motion, “Go pick someone's brains, I'm free till four anyway.”

Inoichi chuckled at her antics and went to open the door only to almost collide with a winded
Hagane, who grabbed the Yamanaka clan head by the shoulders and shook him.

“Rae and Nanagusa gave Team Seven that mission, taichō!” he wheezed in panic, “I tried to warn them it's a bad idea, I swear! The Takara Estate! We're all doomed!”

*Oh well, Inoichi thought, suppressing a smile, that would make an amazing mission report.*

Chapter End Notes

Yes, it is Monday evening, which is definitely not Saturday. Oopsie. Mah birthday was on Tuesday and there were preps to be done, then there were work-related problems and I got to actually writing the most of it on weekend and today. This chapter is really long though, so I'm almost not sorry for the delay. Almost.

Also, here's an alert: side characters, especially not walking powerhouse ones, are important for the story for one simple reason - no matter what Kishi thinks, you can't win a war by punching or sweet talking your way through enemy lines. Now to good news.

mah frien Ais had a birthday too and HAPPY BIRTHDAY YOU LOVELY CREATURE! She's also the proud author of a particular line by Sakura and constantly an inspiration!

ALSO, 10K hits guys, this is crazy! My hugs to you all and to commemorate this number drop a character name in the comments! Everyone mentioned will make it to the chapter 20!

Much love to you, the person who reads this. Yes, you!

upd: the work on ch20 is still going, rn the monster is over 11k words (what am i thinking?) actually, if you're up to some htgr related updates, drop by my twitter @easternwind713

see ya!
heart is like a haunted house

Chapter Summary

Rivalry doesn’t mean a thing when both sides are long dead.

Chapter Notes

I've created a monster. Really in an ideal world of mine ch20 was to tackle the whole Takara estate mission, but I've spent almost a month on it already and by now the 'chapter' is 14k long and slowly grows an arc of its own. Maybe I should just let it be, I thought, so it's time to release it from my chest and make it an arc. Come, enjoy the fruits of my suffering :D

The song for this chapter is Haunted House by Florence + The Machine

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I, Uzumaki Naruto, the mightiest genin of 'em all, ID 100119-1G/101006UN1 genin of Konohagakure, report the mission “The Exorcism of Doom” D221018/4-13 complete.

“Naruto, this is not how you file the report and you know it! I'm crossing that out! You can't give a name to the mission!”

A groan reached Kakashi's ears from his living room were his genin were sprawled all over his poor couch, almost turning it over as they fought for probably already crumpled sheet of paper. Thank gods he had the foresight to forbid them from writing the first version of mission report directly on the corresponding scroll.

“But Sakura-chan, I've already rewritten it three times, 'ttebayo!”

“Then start working on the fourth. Count it as your additional calligraphy practice for today. Shoosh!”

Sakura, it seemed, had an indefinite amount of patience when it came to Naruto's education. She was firm, but Kakashi could hear her pat boy's shoulder in reassurance, even though his back was turned to the couch as he slowly fixed tea and conducted a fruitless search of his food supplies (which were unsurprisingly lacking). He sighed and ran through the handseals for bunshin. Even with his headsplitting headache he still could hold the clone long enough for it to sprint to the closest takoyaki stand and bring back some food, His kids deserved a treat after this hell of a mission.

Naruto whined back in the living room but dutifully went back to work. He certainly needed a more hands-on approach than Academy had been able to provide him with and he was learning much faster now that the team took over.

For Sakura's part, some of her fervor probably was guilt speaking. While her reasons for staying away from Naruto had been pretty self-explanatory, the newfound clanship the two shared certainly added a whole new level of responsibility she seemed to develop for the blonde. But Kakashi could
see the girl really cared so he wasn't going to look gift horse in the mouth. Sakura knew all the rules, let her impart that vitally important bureaucratic knowledge on the unsuspecting Naruto.

“...maybe this one will go better,” she sighed and Kakashi spotted her play absently with ink splattered loose end of her braid as she went back to rereading her own report.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about it, Haruno.”

Ah, and there was the resident genius talking.

“Uh-huh, Mister It-must-be-wind-howling~ Why don't you show me yours then?”

“Hn.” Shuffling sounds were followed by a focused murmur.

“Uchiha Sasuke... 090119US1... mission accomplished without major incidents... Aha! You've missed your birthday date and rank! That's an old way to mark IDs, Sasuke-kun~ Rewrite! Off you go!”

It was delivered with so much unrestrained glee, Kakashi had to fight a shiver. There were changes, huh? He just hoped she would never see his reports (which was a futile hope, truth be told). That girl was something else, absolutely something else.

Such was the life of Konoha's Copy Nin - Hound barely had to file written reports. Rabbit and Cat had been dealing with that bureaucratic bullshit while he took on the politicking. But now he was jōnin-sensei and the very person in charge of his team's progress. Sure thing he was well equipped to make sure those scrolls’ contents weren't giving away anything he wanted to keep hidden from Hokage's prying eyes, but making it look acceptable... If there was no escape for his rusty writing skills being rubbed in his face, maybe he could at least rope Sakura into checking his scroll too?

“She's a little terrifying, don't you think, Kakashi?”

Pakkun's low voice didn't carry into the living room since the volume of the lesson on importance of keeping the reports clean of slang - ‘Naruto, I'm talking to you!’ - only continued to rise. The boy in question mutely reached out for another sheet of paper just as Kakashi shrugged one-handedly, balancing four cups of tea on a hardcover anatomy atlas (courtesy of Tenrō) he was using as a tray.

“Better she than me.”

He silently returned into the living room where Naruto was sulking over yet another version of the events while Sakura and Sasuke were hovering behind him like two vengeful spirits. Kakashi handed them the cups, patted their heads and perched on the armrest of the couch, busying himself with one of the earliest Naruto's attempts at reporting.

He'd probably keep that one.

!Uzumaki Naruto's awesome report, 'ttebayo!

So! We got out of the Mission Assignment Desk 'cause Kaka-sensei used some real cool jutsu! (gotta learn that one too!) That was rude btw, Nanagusa-sensei's gotta kick our asses for disappearing without a proper goodbye

We got to that huge Takara house and then shit happened, Sasuke-teme screamed like a girl - Ino when she sees him and Sakura-chan and Kaka-sensei got really pissed but in the way you can't really tell
Yes, Kakashi would absolutely keep this one, if only to dangle it in Naruto’s face when he’s older and hopefully better at reporting. It would totally make a good laugh. He swiftly pocketed the paper and leaned back, resting against the wall with his eye closed and tuning out Naruto’s incessant whining, “Ne, ne, Sakura-chan! This one is better, I promise!”

They had a long way ahead, that’s for sure, and Kakashi just sat there for a moment and dared to hope coherent mission reports would be the worst trouble they ever face.

Sakura sipped her tea absently as she took another peek in the scroll sensei had been working on. Academically speaking, it was a mess: the codes and IDs were all wrong and probably decade old at least, some sections were entirely absent. Content wise though… The text was eloquent, detailed enough to count as a proper report, but some more events besides the major discovery they’d promised to keep quiet about were very carefully omitted too. She was itching to ask why, but by now she knew better than that. Sitting as he was, Kakashi-sensei basically gave her a blanket permission to look over his shoulder, but it didn’t mean he was okay with her lecturing him or being noisy.

Naruto was sprawled on the floor with his right hand lying limply on top of yet another unfinished report. Sasuke had finished his final draft a while ago and chose to stand by the window. She could see red flickers with her peripheral vision, meaning he kept his sharingan on, probably tracing the paths other shinobi took up the roofs as they hurriedly snuck to and from Hokage Tower, Mission Assignment Desk and other ninja-related sights of Konoha.

“Haruno, come here,” he murmured, sensing that bit of attention she spared him, and Sakura turned to him fully, intrigued. His face had that distant, somber expression that usually meant he was thinking about his clan.

“Okay?” a corner of her mouth rose just a fraction as she slid into the narrow gap between the couch and Sasuke, who didn’t exactly move to give her some place to stand. He grunted something that could be interpreted as an agreement if she was willing to play that game. Their shoulders were touching and he didn’t step away to break the connection.

*Looks like he needs it, mulish idiot~* Inner groaned at the back of her mind, *he could’ve just asked for a freaking hug~* We *both know he won’t.* Sakura’s eyes were fixed on slowly fading into another winter evening village.

Sasuke probably wasn’t memorizing those routes or copying others’ movements at all.

It was a beautiful scenery Kakashi-sensei’s window held in its wooden frame as an ever changing masterpiece. Falling into an easy evening routine Konoha’s market district was bustling with life in the distance, hundreds of paper lanterns and lampposts shining dimly over the food stalls as small beacons for bored and hungry. People were milling in the streets not unlike Shino’s bugs - tiny, always far away and busy with something known only to them.

A group of kids, Academy first or second years, all proper and their backs ramrod-straight - Hyūga probably - crossed the street and turned left, taking the road to clan compounds, and Sasuke stifled a sigh by Sakura’s side. She shifted her footing almost imperceptibly so their elbows could connect, creating another point of contact, but stayed silent. There wasn’t anything for her to say really and
they continued their quiet vigil.

The sky, a patchwork quilt hanging above the forest beyond Konoha Wall, was overcast with heavy clouds of so many shades of grey even Ino would have trouble to name them all. Soot, Inner supplied readily, memory of Takara Estate and its blackened floorboards springing at the front of their mindscape like a jack-in-the-box. Ash, Sakura conceded and took a deep breath to clear her thoughts of unwelcome images.

The clouds were looming over Konoha with a promise of snow, completely ignorant of any spectators. They drifted slowly above Kakashi-sensei’s apartment building, crawled up the barely visible Hokage Mountain in the north and curled on top of four stone heads like old fashioned, pre hidden village hats nobility had used to wear. The upcoming snow storm had brought the smell of something foreign to Konoha and it left a somber, bitter taste on the back of Sakura's tongue.

The day was an emotional rollercoaster for everyone, but Sasuke - with his past - got it really bad. The mission was meant to be fun, a simple team-building exercise at that, but Sakura couldn’t but wander back to the way the eyes of Nanagusa-sensei (grey like this damned sky too) darkened almost imperceptibly when they entered the Mission Assignment Desk.

MAD. Isn’t that name self-explanatory? Sensei was right, those chūnin are better not to mess with.

Among all the fooling around and joking Nanagusa-sensei and Rae-san provided in heaps, there had been some power play executed so expertly, any rookie genin was bound to miss it. But Sakura was no simple rookie and while she was busy playing a meek fangirling self, Inner cataloged the blinks and whispers and handsigns. Hagane-san had been unsure the mission was timely assigned, Rae-san insisted it was.

It had been filed three months ago, but lied in the archive gathering dust until they - Team Seven - came in. It was a D-rank alright for anyone, but Sasuke. For him and his team it turned out to be a test. An assessment.

When sensei dropped out of shunshin and came to a halt at the top of the stone stairway leading down to the Fire District, Sakura could only grab onto the boys and try not to puke her guts out. Sasuke by the looks of him did only marginally better, wheezing as he clung to absolutely undeterred by sudden change of scenery Naruto.

“Wow, sensei, that was so cool, 'ttebayo! Will you teach us that trick? Please!” He tried to bounce as usual, but Sakura and Sasuke groaned in unison and he immediately stilled, looking sheepish, “Ne, guys, what's up with you?”

“You wouldn’t be so happy if not for the Fox taking care of you, dobe,” Sasuke grunted taking careful shallow breaths. “Vertigo sucks.”

Kakashi-sensei let go of the three of them immediately, awkwardly putting some distance between him and slightly green genin, but Sakura could swear his eye was creased in a smile. “We’re going to have a briefing while you two catch your breaths,” he chirped - sadist - and patted the pocket with the mission scroll. “Our mission is to go in the main building of the estate, assess structural damage, take away all trash and rubble and collect items of importance. Those are to be placed in separate scrolls and handed over at MAD.”

“But Kaka-sensei-” Naruto shook his hand free from Sasuke’s weakened grip and rubbed his neck nervously, “-what about the ghosts? Isn't the place haunted?”
“Ghosts aren’t real.” Sakura raised a brow at the fidgety blonde, deeply offended by the very idea. She had enough of her father believing in such nonsense, but he at least was a civilian with a way too vivid imagination and possibly childhood trauma from living with five prankster brothers and sisters. Naruto on the other hand was a shinobi and had to know better. She really had to expand the list of topics they must cover, add spiritual and nature energy to it…

But sensei just smirked strangely in a very unsettling way and clapped his hands, “We’ll see, Sakura-chan. Now, down we go!”

It was the only command they needed so Team Seven, trained to obey Hatake Kakashi’s orders almost as good as his own ninken, sprinted down the weathered stone stairs towards the Fire District sprawling lavishly in the small valley hugged by steep banks of Nakagawa.

Takara Estate turned out to be an ancient group of buildings abandoned by its owners long ago. Taking up a huge plot of land in one of the oldest areas of Konoha, it was neighboring with lands of Tachibana clan - the biggest civilian family in the village that had very close ties with Fire Country daimyō. Still, the heart of the estate - an enormous wooden house that Sakura could hardly imagine anyone call their home - stood abandoned and disrupted a picturesque view. It was… strange.

“It was a part of Senju property,” Kakashi-sensei explained in a hushed voice as they approached the main gates, “but now the clan is down to a single member and with her being away from Konoha for more than twenty years… It was decided by the Council the estate will be seized for government needs and sold.”

“Takara Estate,” Sasuke scowled. He was staring at the peeling off in huge chunks green paint that used to cover the outer wall of the estate, but it was a vacant stare. He clearly was deep in his own thoughts now.

Sakura glanced uncertainly at sensei and caught him wince. There was no way to put it nicely and only the blind wouldn’t see the dark irony in that analogy. Senju and Uchiha were the founding clans of Konoha, everyone knew that just as everyone was aware of their fate - the former died out because they had always fought on the frontlines, the latter got slaughtered by their very own heir.

“Whatca mean by ‘long enough’?”

Naruto didn’t catch on the tension that could be cut with a knife as he gingerly touched a rusty chain (which seemed to be the only thing holding the doors of the gate together). It collapsed under his fingers and one of the doors fell down with a resounding boom, tearing the hinges off, while the other screeched dangerously but stayed in place for now. All four shinobi startled and Sasuke finally looked back at his teammate.

“Tsunade Senju, the last of them alive, mysteriously disappeared just before the end of the Second Shinobi War. It’s been more than twenty years now. By the law of Konoha clan property can stay unclaimed for two decades before the Council has the right to claim it vacant and the clan extinct.”

Sakura was listening to Sasuke’s clipped explanation closely, hanging on every word. The way he chose to phrase it… something didn’t add up. Something like-

“They didn’t,” she said flatly, her blunt nails digging into Naruto’s hand to silence him when he opened his mouth. “It’s against the law. They-“

“First thing I’ve been handed outside of psych ward, Haruno, was the official writ signed by the
Council and the Hokage himself.” Sasuke’s face was a porcelain mask empty of any expression as he spit the words out, “Uchiha clan ceased to exist in year 2014 since the birth of the Sage of Six Paths and all assets of the clan were moved into the village’s possession. I have been living on state allowance just as dobe and will have to pay Konoha back in additional taxes from my missions. Council can order me to move out of the house any day now since I’m an adult and they haven’t done this yet only because it would be bad for their public image. There’s no such thing as Uchiha clan outside of history books now.”

The uncomfortable pause that followed was filled with oppressive silence, even Naruto seemed speechless. The four of them simply stood there in front of the collapsed gate carefully not looking at each other until a single bark reached them with a gust of wind. Then unusually serious Akino landed gracefully at sensei’s feet and licked jōnin’s hand in apology.

“Sorry to interrupt, Kakashi, but there are civs coming this way. Maybe you should move this discussion inside before it becomes public knowledge.”

Sensei nodded to the akita tersely and commanded, “We’re going in. You three are staying with me at all times. Akino, the perimeter is on you guys.”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, the man stepped into the overgrown yard through the hole in the gate where the door fell through and genin followed him silently. They all knew the talk wasn’t over but the estate of once great clan really wasn’t the best place for it. If Naruto and Sakura chose to walk much closer to Sasuke than usual, almost hovering over him protectively… Well, that was a form of support among the members of Team Seven no worse than any other.

It must have been beautiful once. No, beautiful probably hadn't done any justice to the Takara Estate in the times of its prime.

The garden, geometrically absurd with all the small paths made from polished by hundreds of feet flat rocks and decorative bridges crossing over what used to be a koi pond, stayed aesthetically pleasing even after decades of neglect, showing how much thought the owners of the place put into its planning.

The fish in the pond was long dead and the water dried out, only thin bone carcasses protruded from the muck left by recent rains.

Naked bushes of azalea and tall spikes of grass that had once been firmly restricted to their places took over and spilled into the rock garden. The plants bent its dry stems as they whispered a melancholic tune in unison with the wind. White sand that hadn’t seen a rake since Second Shinobi War was everywhere, dragged away from the rock garden by animals and roots of overgrown trees.

In the distance a tall building rose gracefully from the shadowy forest of maple trees surrounding it. The middle of winter caught momiji unawares and most of them weren’t leafless, but coated with reddish-brown specs that hung limply over the gravel path from the outstretched branches.

Sasuke walked this misery road slowly, unhurriedly as he took in the view and the garden took shape it had used to have in his mind’s eye. The team didn't push him forward as if they knew he could see more than them, not the decay, but a former glory.

The pathway curled around the main house of the estate like a tail of a lazy cat, showing off smaller buildings and a tiny unkempt shrine half hidden by the branches, until it brought Sasuke to the set of crumbling stairs. He looked up, distantly noticing how trees parted to give a visitor a better view, and
stilled, unable to suppress a wistful smile.

Senju hadn't been boasting when they named the estate 'Takara' - it truly was a treasure.

The house was three storey tall, all wood and paper and something else Sasuke couldn't name, unique and ancient and unmistakably clan. It was in the very bones of the house, its angular architecture and still bright after all this years Senju emblem - a mint green momiji leaf - carved into the roof tiles. It couldn't be more different from the husk of a home Sasuke lived in.

The estate was surrounded by the slow life of noble Fire District and even after twenty years of abandonment it hadn't grown as derelict as the last standing building of Uchiha compound. While Sasuke's clan had been too proud to ask for help, Senju allied with Uzumaki and their seals, no doubt engraved into the walls and the founding stone, kept Takara estate from caving onto itself. It seemed like the owners had only left for a moment, while Sasuke's home, no matter how hard he tried to tend to it, was slowly falling apart.

He stopped in front of the engawa and cast a doubtful glance at his team. Since entering the estate they stayed silent, letting him see whatever he did, even if Naruto's eyes were bright with wonder and Sakura seemed more and more agitated with every step. She probably had a ton of questions and even more explanations at the tip of her tongue, but she respected his… Yes, Sasuke could see what chūnin in MAD had meant now - as the rest of Team Seven wandered Takara estate like a museum, he was walking among the ghosts. Of Senju or his own, he didn't really know. Sasuke had never met people that used to live here in peace and through the wars, but the feeling was the same.

That's why he stopped. The engawa encircling Takara estate was weathered by time, but sloping roof protected it from the worst storms and the seals hadn't let mold and rot touch the wood. It was nowhere as bad as his crumbling porch that promised splinters for everyone daring to step on it bare feet and Sasuke was a shinobi on a mission, not a guest in a noble house. He should've just kept walking, but he could not.

Neither Sakura nor Naruto, maybe not even Kakashi-sensei ever lived in a clan compound, so they couldn't possibly imagine this place bustling with life the way Sasuke did. Senju were rumored to be a happy bunch, so instead of sullen faces of Elders and prim little Uchihas counting their steps with military precision as they walked past, he saw carefree children laughing as they played hide-and-seek in the dusk, adults watching them with small smiles from the porch and pretending to meditate all the while… The echoes of the past that surrounded him weren't even his memories - not memories at all - and he felt like a trespasser here at the very idea of a disrespectful intrusion they'd been ordered.

Sasuke knew rationally that he had to take that step. Eyes, smiling and contemplative and judging - nonexistent, ghostly - stared at him from the shadows. They were no longer here, but the spirit of them - Senju, the founders and forever rivals of Uchiha - called to Sasuke through time and generations.

"Thus is the way of the old blood," his mother once said, "the eyes that have seen great loss hold great power, but the men who have to live with such loss also suffer the most. It is all too easy to lose oneself in the sorrow, still the power means nothing but more suffering when wielded by a madman."

Only now Sasuke could finally begin to understand it. He had seen what power - the greatest power - made of Itachi and since that moment deep deep down inside, under the layers of lies that made him run after the shadow of his brother… he did not want it.

Maybe he won't ever stop seeing those nightmares that kept him awake and shivering at nights.
Maybe the coldness behind his shoulder won’t ever disappear. The ghosts of Uchiha stood behind him and oh what a heavy burden it was to be the last. To live when they had stopped.

Sasuke had been nothing but a shadow himself, a lost name, a hopeless case. People smiled to him politely but avoided being near him like a plague. Konoha wanted his dōjutsu, but it didn’t need a clan for sharingan to continue, one man was just enough.

In all but name Uchiha were forgotten. Nobody missed them and when Sasuke would die the last of their legacy would vanish like morning mist. And what legacy it was? A madman that betrayed the village he had helped to create. A traitor that slaughtered the clan he had been born and raised to lead. No one would care to mourn Sasuke’s people.

Could he change that? Could he make peace with his ghosts?

Was Takara estate the place where he could start?

It had used once to be a home to Senju, who even after twenty years since the last one set foot into the village, were legends. Two Hokage came from the line that gave Konoha countless warriors and healers. They had used to be what Uchiha failed to achieve - beloved protectors, knights in a shining armors, symbols of hope - you name it. But even that fame hadn’t saved them.

“Pathetic,” Sasuke’s father would say and probably spit on Senju monument if he'd still been alive. He had claimed to be a man of honor, but basic human decency tended to elude him. Sasuke adopted that way of speaking, but Team Seven was slowly working their way through his defenses and it began sliding away like an old shell.

“Treat the dead with respect,” his mother would chide and it’s her who Sasuke would listen to. He had always been his mother’s son after all.

*Rivalry doesn’t mean a thing when both sides are long dead.*

From the creaks in shoji and in shadows of engawa Sasuke could feel them watch him, the ghosts of Senju. They weren’t frowning at him because he held no guilt before them, but smiled because he saw their masterpiece of a home the way they used to have. They didn’t need appeasing, but Sasuke wanted to acknowledge their memory. They didn’t need his remembrance, not really, but Sasuke was willing to keep it nevertheless.

He stood among the ghosts and for the first time in years it wasn’t suffocating. The pain from loss of his clan would never fade, but here in the Takara estate Sasuke had been stricken with an epiphany: the life never stopped, no matter how hard he tried to freeze the time. Futile were his attempts and the home that wasn’t even his own anymore kept falling apart because it had always been missing one but most important thing. It, just as his clan, had been built with pride in mind and traded steadiness and support in favor of solitude and arrogance.

Takara estate - just like Senju legacy - outlived Senju themselves by decades because its pride was in their loyalty to the village and their allies. The pond may have dried up and the paint was coming off the fence of the estate, but its spirit was still alive and Sasuke welcomed it in until understanding bloomed in his chest, easing his burden just enough for him to breathe again.

Sasuke squeezed his eyes shut tightly and when he opened them again, willing the sharingan activate, his ghosts were still there but there were Sakura and Naruto too, worried, bright and warm by his side, and Kakashi-sensei - a calm presence, still but real. *This* was his solid foundation. When he had been crumbling, they held him together, when he had found himself lost, they got lost with him only to start making a new path they all would walk together.
If Sasuke were a house, in his Academy days he probably would have been the Uchiha compound - an empty ruin with clan’s ghosts holding silent vigil among the rubble. Right now he could probably pass for Takara estate - the walls intact and even garden still salvageable should new inhabitants care for it and then the old ghosts would smile down at them from their nooks and crannies. And maybe one day he could hope to turn into someone akin to Haruno residence - an utterly loyal safe harbor for those who dared to accept him as a wreck - even if tomato bushes in full bloom in the beginning of January would look completely out of place among the haughty estates of Nidai Kōen district. Metaphorically, of course.

Yes, he’d like that.

But before everything else Sasuke had to complete the mission his team received. The mission was his duty. It also was a test for him, but he had a feeling he had found his answer.

He looked at Sakura and murmured, breaking the spell of silence, “It would be wise if we take off the shoes before entering.” Shinobi on a mission they might be, but Sasuke didn’t plan to be disrespectful to the place that revealed so much to him, not when it opened something so important for his past and future both. The green of Sakura’s eyes darkened and she nodded, catching his unspoken plea.

“It makes sense. The estate is marked for sale, isn’t it? Then we best not do more harm to the tatami inside.”

Kakashi honestly didn’t know whether he should be relieved or worried as he studied his genin. Sakura nibbled on her lower lip waiting for his approval (she came up with quite passable reasoning on the fly, he had to give her that at least), Naruto clearly had no idea why shoes were even brought up, but crouched already, pulling at his bandages and Sasuke… the boy was barely here. Kakashi felt for him, couldn’t but do and still… Sasuke needed to learn how to distance himself from places like this, no matter how close to home it hit him or he only would be a liability for the team.

Ten minutes walk through the garden made him look a good year older and it was an awful lot for barely a teenager. A haunted expression, the way his eyes darted to shadowy corners of the engawa, a slight twitch of his brow - Kakashi feared the breakdown that could follow this mission. Or interrupt it.

Sasuke was slowly falling apart right now for all he knew, because the boy was dragging his ghosts to the surface, letting them overtake reality as he looked for the reasons to appease them and Sakura had just helped him justify it. She tried her best, the man could see it in her eyes. While Naruto simply followed her lead, entirely relying on her knowledge of etiquette, to Sakura taking off their sandals before entering someone’s living space was only polite. This was a mission though, but if letting Sasuke have it would bring him some peace, she’d advocate that and maybe even more.

Sakura was not sickly infatuated with young Uchiha, but she truly cared for him, no matter how misplaced her attempts might be. If only she knew how slippery that slope could be for Sasuke.

Kakashi, the man whose ghosts had almost pulled him under when he was just slightly older than Sasuke, was quite able to imagine those depths. It was only by luck he managed to find his solace in something as non-destructive as taking up some of Obito’s bad habits and spending his mornings by the cenotaph. And now it was Kakashi’s duty to make sure Sasuke didn’t spiral down, both as his superior and teammate.

The problem was, Sasuke's ghosts weren't born from a battle lost, not sacrifices made for peace in
wartime. There was no monument for the last Uchiha to come to, instead he had to live in the ruins of what used to be his home tainted by the blood of his kin. His ghosts were family: some of them shinobi, retired or active, some - civilians, and many just innocent children.

Did Sasuke see them anywhere he went, felt that crippling blame in the eyes of total strangers the way Kakashi did? What helped him swallow the guilt for being alive when they were dead?

Kakashi caught himself staring at the boy. He was looking for something in his features, both fearing and hoping to find it at the same time. But what?

“Sensei,” Sasuke said almost gently when he met man's eye, way too gently for Kakashi to ignore the hint of desperation in his voice, “this place deserves to be treated with respect. That is the only meaning behind my words.”

And here it was, a small upturn to his lips and Kakashi felt the weight slide off his shoulders at the sight of it. Sometimes it was hard to remember that Sasuke wasn't him and he wasn't Sasuke’s imminent future. They might have had a lot in common, their losses making them who they were, but they were also their own beings. Honestly, Kakashi didn't have any idea what went through the head of the Uchiha boy but he could smell Sasuke’s sincerity.

His scent had always been sneeze-inducing, like dust and wood polish since the day they first met, but now Uchiha Sasuke smelt faintly of a kindling bonfire with a barely noticeable trace of ozone, a promise of a thunderstorm. For Sakura it was her sensing bout and for Sasuke this midday at Takara estate became the moment when his chakra system matured.

“Okay,” Kakashi said, ignoring relief bubbling in his chest as he patted boy's coarse mop of unruly hair. “Let’s save those future owners from tatami trouble.”

Chapter End Notes

Sooo, first of all I'm sorry for a horrible delay! This chapter is a monster and I stand by my word - Takara estate is going to be 3-4 chapter long arc so everything is dealt with at a due pace and I don't go bald from ripping my hair out in frustration. Also, all characters that I promised to put in ch20 will appear in Takara estate arc, those parts are already written actually. The only ones I'm happy with :D

Thanks to all my readers! I really appreciate the support you give and it were your reviews that made me keep trying when I hated the parts I wrote or got stuck with no direction. You guys are the best!

Much love, Kay <3
nothing's ever built to last

Chapter Summary

There's something wrong with Takara estate.

Chapter Notes

The song for this chapter is **21 Guns by Green Day**

Every time Sakura visited Yamanaka compound before her and Ino’s pseudo fall out, she had been amazed by its charming nature. Dozens of traditional wooden houses with roofs made of vibrantly colored tiles seemed to bloom like flowers in a beautiful maze of greenhouses and orchards that sprawled behind an ancient terracotta wall. Some houses were huge and imposing like Ino’s home, some small and secluded like that of her great-grandmothers’. The compound was a wonderful place and Sakura often tried to imagine what other clans’ grounds would look like. Did Akimichi or Aburame live just like that? As a clanless academy student she could only guess.

But the moment she set her foot into the premises of Takara estate, she immediately felt dwarfed by the monumentality of the place. It was… regal in a way.

She followed sensei who did a good job of not looking like he let Sasuke lead them through the garden with Naruto threading close behind her as he took the rear of their small procession. They walked slowly and it gave Sakura a perfect opportunity to take a closer look at the way noble clans had used to live. The place was someone’s past, not present though and the markings of time were not that subtle.

When Sasuke, pale as a waning moon, but somehow grounded, more solid than she had ever seen him since the very Uchiha massacre, looked at her with his dark hopeful eyes, she didn’t hesitate supporting his plea. Naruto, warm and unwavering, didn’t even need an explanation.

There was more to this place for Sasuke than she or the blonde boy would ever be able to understand. They had never known what it felt like to be a part of a clan, but they also never had to go through the pain of losing it while Sasuke lived through it and everything in the Takara estate must be reminding him of what he had been robbed of. Sakura had never been an empath, not with her personality split, but her team had already settled into her bones and the connection between her and her boys was solid (she wasn’t quite sure about Kakashi-sensei yet, but only because he had had much more time to close off than Sasuke or Naruto).

Whatever had been plaguing sensei’s mind was eased by Sasuke’s reply. Sakura felt the air between them shift and settle and even though this wasn’t *she* whom Kakashi-sensei had been watching like a hawk for any signs of falling apart, she found it easier to breathe. Sakura saw the reluctance and imminent relief in what little of man’s face was unhidden by the mask and then there was no time for contemplations anymore.
Bare feet covered only by thin layers of bandages didn't produce no sounds as Team Seven followed Kakashi-sensei through dim corridors of the ground floor. While the house itself had been barely touched by the passing of time, not much of the furniture stayed intact.

Low tables and a kotatsu Naruto had discovered in what appeared to be a storage room dissolved into splinters under his touch, the same happened to the remains of a poetry scroll that hung in the tokonoma - an alcove with long-dead potted bonsai at its base. The pot itself was cracked and the blonde impressed Sakura with an unexpected show of gentleness as he lifted ceramic bowl up from the narrow space and carefully placed it onto one of many storage scrolls sensei handed them. Not a single speck of dried soil ended up on the tatami which was good (it would be a menace to clean that dirt from between the tightly woven straws).

They rarely spoke as they moved through the rooms and silence seemed to reign over Takara estate. It wasn’t oppressive though, mostly because ninety percent of the rooms were completely barren save for a zabuton pillow or a scroll here and there and it just felt like the owners left for good long before the estate was sealed down. Sakura briefly wondered if the emptiness was due to Senju’s numbers slow decline during the war or if someone had entered the place before them and took all items of importance away.

They worked peacefully through the ground floor, slowed down only once in a tea room that looked hastily abandoned. Kintsugi style teacups - with cracks in the ceramics repaired with golden lacquer - were laying haphazardly on the floor, one in the hearth and other two in the middle of dark stains on tatami mats. The teapot, bronze by the look of it, sported a big dent in the bottom and there were more splash marks where it lay. The metal turned greenish-blue with time but Sakura couldn't help but appreciate intricate details on the tinted with gold surface.

“A fight?” she murmured softly as she lifted the cups up and placed them into the “fragile” scroll, but Sasuke shook his head no.

“Look at the stains, can’t be twenty years old. The tatami would rot through by now. It’s new.”

“Relatively,” her sensei nodded, kneeling beside the biggest stain. His shoulders tensed for a split second before going slack again. “Not older than six months, though I would say eleven to twelve weeks. The tea wasn’t prepared correctly too.”

“Ne, ne, guys,” Naruto laughed nervously, “but what if this place is really haunted?”

Sakura stifled a groan and even Kakashi-sensei seemed to chuckle at the blonde's apparent fear. It was funny in a way - he was keeping one of the strongest Great Spirits known to the world in his body and somehow was afraid of ghosts.

“Dobe, don't be an idiot,” Sasuke grumbled without real heat. “You’ve heard the briefing. The neighbors might have claimed they saw lights in the windows of the third floor, but the estate had been sealed down until recently. No one could enter it without breaking the seal and ghosts don’t need lights.”

“What seal? There was just that rusty gate, ’ttebayo!”

“You cannot see it yet,” the jōnin murmured and sniffed at the air. “There was a blood ward seal in place. Only Senju could come in and out without alerting the Council and there are none in Konoha anymore. It must have been broken by specialists before we were sent here to clean up.”
Ino's father would know if any Senju were still in Konoha. Yamanaka monitor all chakra signatures in the village,” Sakura nodded thoughtfully as she bent to pick at something stuck in the junction of tatami mats, “Look, here's…”

Four shinobi stared at a tiny, barely three by two centimeter navy blue piece of fabric in Sakura's fingers with varying degrees of suspicion and disbelief until Naruto - always the quickest even if not the smartest one - asked, “What's that?”

In the dim light Sasuke's eyes flashed bright red briefly. “Silk, dobe. Fine high class silk.”

“Look at the texture!” Sakura bit her lip in surprise as she inspected the fabric. It wasn't something she was able to easily justify being in a locked down estate. “Warp yarns are indigo, but the wefts are iron. Or is it shadow? No, both, the ratio is five to sixteen… Nanagusa-sensei said such fine silks are only used for special occasions…”

Male population of the room listened to her ramblings with faint bemusement.

“…oh my… this is Fire Daimyō Court Spring 2001 Collection! It's a piece of a unique kimono, Ino raved about that one for ages after we saw a photo! The Soul of the Night, I can't believe it…” she trailed off again.

Maybe you should explain what it means to your team, long face, Inner smirked at the back of her mind, they look like they're ready to call doctors in...~

“Oi, shut it,” Sakura bit back absently but looked up at her teammates and cleared her throat when her eyes met three vacant stares in a row. “We've been taught the history of civilian fashion in kunoichi classes. Nanagusa-sensei always said it comes in handy in undercover missions and 'all that jazz,'” Sakura did finger quotes, clearly mimicking one of her Academy teachers and went on with her explanations. "This must be a part of Sandaime-sama's late spouse's attire. If I remember correctly, Biwako-sama had only worn it once in May 2003 at daimyō second son's wedding. But I have no idea how it got here, the estate must have been sealed off around 1998…”

As if the time had slowed down she saw Kakashi-sensei's eye narrow and his nostrils flared slightly behind the black mask. He inhaled deeply, tasting the air and Sakura backed down instinctively when sensei's voice dropped an octave lower.

“This smell...”

She could swear she heard a growl and saw Sasuke suppress a shiver but Naruto paid it no mind as he unceremoniously pushed his nose into Sakura's palm and then dropped on his knees, trying to catch a whiff of anything his teacher felt from the place where Sakura found the fabric. It didn't need to be said he did not succeed.

“Argh, Kaka-sensei, you're just like Kiba!” he whined staring up at his startled teammates. “What? It's not fair! I want to smell things out too!” He shook his hands in the air for emphasis but suddenly stilled and a huge smirk that stretched his lips made him look like Kushina-sama in one of the photos Sakura's mother had kept locked away in the album.

The girl followed Naruto’s line of sight, not sure if she wanted to know what made the boy this smug, and saw nothing, but before she managed to ask Kakashi-sensei abruptly reached out and took the scrap of fabric from her.

“Nothing goes in your mission reports until I approve it, understood?” His voice was nonchalant and he even patted Sakura's head in silent approval of her watchfulness, still she couldn't shake off the
feeling of wrongness.

“Yes, sensei,” she reported mechanically, echoed by equally bemused Sasuke.

“Sure, Kaka-sensei! Umm, why don't you come here guys?” Naruto cleared his throat from the corner of the room where he just crouched in front of a small square door that led into the yard. The rest of the team joined him and in the dispersing light that streamed from the outside through the paper shoji dividers they studied faint traces in the dust. Someone had used that door to enter the house and had done it repeatedly. The traces looked fresh.

“Vandals?” the blonde offered, rubbing his neck quite self-consciously. Sakura knew about his track record with Hokage Monument (who didn't) but she couldn't really imagine him breaking into some old shut down estate.

“Hardly. Take a closer look,” the jōnin ordered and all three genin peered at the barely fifty centimeters in height entry as if it was hiding all secrets of the universe from them.

“Here!” Naruto stage-whispered at the same time as Sakura hummed to Sasuke's “Ah…” and they shared a look. Together the boys excruciatingly slowly moved the tiny door just a few centimeters up and as soon as the crack was wide enough, Sakura hastily grabbed another piece of navy fabric. It clearly used to be a part of the famed kimono, but judging by the uneven hand-stitched edge more recently it had been resewn into something else.

“Shinobi from administration would use a front door, wouldn't they?” Sakura wasn't sure why she was stating the obvious, but this mission suddenly stopped feeling right. She cast a suspicious glance around, looking for anything that could explain what the fuck was going on?

“We need to search the rest of the house,” the jōnin behind their backs said decisively. His outstretched hand accepted Team Seven's new discovery and Sakura didn't even have a second to register its disappearance in one of many pockets of Kakashi-sensei's vest because the man was already moving. She scrambled to her feet and together with nervously scratching his neck Naruto and red eyed Sasuke she padded softly after him.

Naruto felt creeps travel up his spine and winter cold had nothing to do with it. While the estate’s ground floor had been quiet, the silence was not tense but comfortable. Every step up the stairs leading to the second floor, however, was like diving into Oetsugawa's dark murky waters - suffocating, unsettling. Like someone was staring at Naruto from deep shadows pooling in every corner.

The corridor they’d been checking was wide and the doors to other rooms (all barren and layered with a thick layer of dust) were opened welcomingly. The four of them quickly cleared the floor and began climbing higher. Still Naruto couldn’t shake off the feeling of wrongness until it hit him - a faint whistling sound coming from above in uneven trillings.

“Heard that?” he whispered to Sakura-chan and Sasuke-teme softly, knowing that sensei would hear him anyway. He was cool just like that.

Sasuke simply shrugged. “Must be wind blowing, the weather is changing. It’s always like that in abandoned places. Echo bounces off the walls.”

It used to be full of yells and laughter, Kyūbi rumbled suddenly and Naruto almost tripped on his own feet. Mito lived here with her madman of a mate. They were disgusting saps, kit, to see
this decay… It would ruin them.

Naruto glanced at the pale boy padding softly next to him from under his thick auburn lashes. He had lived most of his life in a rundown one-room apartment in the shittiest part of the village, surrounded by the sounds of retching, brawling and not always consensual sex, so maybe it wasn’t his place to talk but no one should be saying things like this so easily. Abandoned places… isn’t teme’s house one of ’em?

Takara estate was creepy, yes, but Sasuke? He was even more so.

I doubt he chose this, kit.

Yeah, he didn’t, I know, Naruto nodded slightly to himself as he slithered through yet another empty hallway, following Sakura-chan in her tracks. It's just… wrong? Why would his brother do something like this, Kurama?

The Fox huffed indignantly and Naruto could swear he felt him roll his eyes. Clans! They either spawn like flies until their blood thins out or inbreed to the point of their young be born frail and easily broken. Uchiha were the latter and doesn’t it show.

Inbreed? Like- “Oof!” Naruto did stumble and almost barrelled into Sasuke who thankfully felt the incoming pile of limbs and hastily grabbed the blonde by the collar of his jacket.

“Watch your feet dobe!” he hissed and shook Naruto a bit for good measure before letting him go.

“Yeah, sorry for that!” He rubbed his neck sheepishly, but Sasuke had already turned away to inspect an empty room on their right. So, you mean like teme's parents are- he once again asked Kyūbi, trying to remember Sasuke's mom from the photo he'd seen.

Second cousins. The Fox confirmed. He was unusually talkative but maybe it was because he was feeling nostalgic? Naruto could only guess so he just soaked up everything the Spirit told him, greedy to know more. Kushina was livid when Mikoto came to her in tears the day her Elders decided she was old enough to be married off. She has been betrothed to Fugaku, he spit the name as if it was bile, since childhood, but hoped she would have a chance to choose.

Naruto recoiled internally at that. Ugh, that's gross! Isn't it forbidden or whatnot? Even in slums people don't do their cousins!

Humans, Kurama laughed bitterly at that and began fading away. Ask your teammates about kekkei genkai preservation, kit, it will be quite eye opening for you then.

Not the one to gawk for long, the blonde harrumphed awkwardly to get his team's attention. “Uhh, guys? What's kekkei genkai preservation?” He was looking at Sasuke because who if not him - the one with kekkei genkai of his own - would know, but it was Sakura-chan who answered his abrupt question.

“Kekkei Genkai Preservation Act is a new set of rules that has been adopted in 1982 instead of the old one that most of the clans had used since before the villages were created. It mostly prohibits such issues like theft, involuntary extraction, experiments on humans and such. Why?”

Naruto shrugged, “Jus’ wanna know. And the old rules?”

Sakura scrunched her nose. He was getting suspicious but she didn't pry. She had already learned that Naruto was crazily tight-lipped when he wanted to be and the attempts to squeeze anything he
didn't want to share out of him weren't worth the time spent. “The stronger the jutsu was, the stricter
those rules were,” she began explaining instead. “The most common were reproduction policies from
quite liberal - the need to get an approval of the Elders to marry someone you choose, to extreme like
no marriage outside the clan or even sanctioned by clan Elders inbreeding to recreate a stronger
kekkei genkai. It's formally banned now.”

“Ourchiha never renounced it and Hyūga still practice it to keep their dōjutsu under control and away
from potential spies and thieves.” Sasuke's quiet, deadly serious voice interrupted Sakura's little
lecture like a gong in the middle of the night and Naruto saw her flinch slightly before nodding once
at the mention of the names. So it was true?

Even Naruto knew that things like that had potential to turn out bad for the kids. Seemed like they
already did for Uchiha clan.

He hadn't met any Hyūga except for that girl - Hinata from Academy - a very shy kid that had been
only slightly better at taijutsu than himself, Shikamaru and Chōji and spent most of her time in the
farthest from teme's fanclub corner of the classroom. Hinata seemed nice though, she even talked to
him once when they were still small kids and had never picked on him so Naruto sincerely hoped she
wouldn't have to marry her cousin or some shit like this like Sasuke's mom apparently had to. It just
wasn't fair.

Naruto wouldn't be himself if the ideas didn't come at him out of thin air and stuck with him like
burrs. His best ideas like that glitter filled smoke tag just did and it was exactly what happened to him
again when he stopped in his tracks in the middle of the corridor and bumped his thumb in his chest
decisively, “When I'm Hokage, I'll make sure this old crap is banned for good, 'ttebayo!”

He suddenly felt very warm when Sakura-chan looked at him with her that real smile and Sasuke-
teme gruffly said, “I'll back you up on this one.”

Then a big hand ruffled his hair and Kakashi-sensei chuckled, “That’s something your parents would
have approved, but keep it down for now, Naruto. No need to kill your political career well before it
even began.”

The talk about kekkei genkai left Team Seven in a somber mood and they finished the last three
rooms of the estate twice as fast, ready to get away from the gloomy semi-darkness. Sakura felt her
focus begin to slip as she traced the shadows crawling up the shoji dividers and wooden beams, and
even Inner got somewhat distracted, mulling over the idea Naruto had given them.

Even though Uchiha compound had been leveled down years ago, leaving just Sasuke's house
standing, and a new district was slowly closing in, ready to spill into freed space, the fact that Sasuke
was not the owner of the land had never been made public knowledge. Kekkei Genkai Preservation
Act was something most of his made of future kunoichi fanclub knew about - for a clanless girl it
could become a ticket to what they thought would be a better, protected and wealthy life. It was only
logical - wouldn't the village need him to marry and have more sharingan kids as soon as he was
legible? Only now Sakura knew: his clan assets were seized in favor of Konoha right after the
massacre, his home was on a lease and his name barely cost anything anymore.

The Act was a tool in the eyes of dozen nameless starry eyed genin, but what if they knew the truth?

With his personality? The boy has no chance of getting further than the first base~

Shut up, you gross bitch, Sakura snapped at gleeful Inner. The Act at least can't force anyone to
marry him for the sake of reproduction like the old rules did.

If Hyūga still do that, it's not as prohibited as you think, long face~

So what? Council will choose him a poor girl and wait for more little Uchiha to appear? What next? They'll be forced to intermarry so the kekkei genkai doesn't disappear?

Sakura wanted it to be a pile of crap, but the more she pondered the idea, the darker her thoughts became. It seemed an outcome no less realistic than complete extinction like it had happened in case of many old clans that could now be only found in history books. Like Uzumaki.

She was so engrossed in her argument with Inner, she had almost missed it - another small piece of silky navy fabric stuck in between two inconspicuous floor planks under her feet. But how it could get there?

“There’s something,” she murmured to get her team’s attention, kneeling to take a closer look. Sasuke and Naruto peered at the suspicious piece over her shoulders as she tried to pry free, but her nails just scraped the surface uselessly. Sakura tried again and again she failed. The fabric was...inside the plank? “What the- Kai!” Her chakra surged towards her temples and eyes, pulsing through tenketsu points to break the genjustsu, yet nothing changed. The fabric was still there, stuck in the floorboard.

Sakura heard shuffling and a hitch in Sasuke’ breathing behind her. Startled, she jolted upright with a kunai in her hand, ready to pounce at the attacker or flee on sensei’s orders, only to freeze in place with her mouth slightly open.

Damn, it looks wicked!~

Yeah, she agreed with Inner dazedly, staring at three slowly spinning tomoe in Kakashi-sensei’s eye. It was the first time she actually saw it and with that scar…

“Oh,” the man said and swiftly returned the hitaiate back to its usual place. “Quick thinking, Sakura, good job. That’s not a genjutsu though.”

She raised her brows expectantly, waiting for an explanation as she put the kunai back in her weapons pouch. Naruto muttered something unintelligible, another clunk of metal telling her the blonde’s reaction was quite similar to hers and Sasuke was still a chilly presence behind her back. She felt bad for him, seeing sharingan probably wasn’t easy for him after what had happened to him and his clan, but they were on a mission and the best emotional support she could offer at the moment was standing in the line of fire to give him some time to get his shit together.

“There are seal arrays on the other sides of every panel that probably reacted with this fabric owner’s chakra and pulled the piece in. It happens sometimes when old seals go without recharge for a long time, they start latching on every chakra source,” Kakashi-sensei explained as he began walking in circles in the dead end of the corridor they stopped at.

“But that means someone really was here after the estate was sealed off and before the Council reopened it?” Sakura glanced at her find apprehensively. Something was definitely fishy about this whole situation.

Sensei nodded and his mask moved as he chewed on his lower lip, clearly thinking whether to tell them something or not, but Naruto beat him to whatever he wanted to say.

“Uh, guys…Kurama says there’s another room here,” he whispered suddenly in a small voice. The boy pointed at an absolutely solid looking wall at the end of the corridor, grumbling to himself,
“I’m what?! It's still a room and I’m not telling him that, he’s my teammate and that’s rude, ’ttebayo!”

Kakashi-sensei’s brow crept up to his hairline but before Sakura had even a chance to explain to him the Spirit probably said something scathing about Sasuke, Uchiha rolled his eyes and muttered, “If it helps, I’m not a big fan of him too.”

Naruto sputtered, clearly torn between what was happening in his mindscape and reality. Sasuke just elbowed him away from the place where the piece of fabric was stuck and beckoned Sakura to come closer. She did, noticing how sensei drifted to the side, giving the floor to them. Literally. He was still studying them, learning their evolving dynamics and letting them learn from experiences.

“What do we do?” Sakura squinted at Sasuke expectantly. He usually was the silent, passive one of their group (unless Naruto struck a nerve and he did it frequently just to make sure Sasuke didn’t turn into a statue), so when he actually took initiative it meant he knew what he was doing.

Sasuke cocked his head to the side and sighed. “The dem- Uh, spirit is right, there must be a sanctuary in any decent clan compound. Takara estate is a clan compound. We stuck our noses in every room, but didn’t find anything besides some pottery and poetry scrolls, so it’s either taken away or hidden. If we believe that it’s there,” all four members of the Team Seven stared at the plain wall before them with different levels of distrust, “then there must be a way in. Dobe, do you know where?”

“Well, no and because you decided to be a smartass he refuses to tell me, teme! And it’s damn hard to concentrate on two things at once!”

Sasuke smirked. “That’s because your attention span is shit.”

“Boys, come on! We’re on a mission” Sakura intervened before they spiraled into another heated bickering session again. While it was good to see Sasuke act like himself, they had a puzzle to crack and, contrary to her Academy senseis’ beliefs Sakura hated puzzles. “Naruto, why did Kurama-sama tell you about the sanctuary?”

That seemed to throw the blonde off balance and he forgot a retort that was on his tongue already. He scratched his neck and shrugged, “His first host, Mito-san lived here. He was being nostalgic. Ow! Rude!”

Sakura didn’t envy him, judging by his pinched face Naruto just had an earful. If mental rants of a Great Spirit felt like Inner’s snaps did maybe it was better for Naruto’s sanity when they hadn’t been on speaking terms yet. On another note, Uzumaki Mito-sama was a wife of Shodai, it made sense that she had used to live here. It also meant Kurama-sama must know how to open the damn door! I vote we punch Sasuke for being a jerk and Naruto for being an idiot~

Oh no, not you… Sakura rolled her eyes, trying to distance herself from the cacophony that filled her mind. If I were to hide a very important room, where I would put the lock?

Where you won’t activate it by accident, long face. I bet it’s a pressure plate or some kind of puzzle. There must be logic in it~

And if chakra surge pulled the fabric into the wood here… Sakura stepped over at where the navy spot was barely visible on the dark polished surface, pointed at it and then took a step back. “Sensei, will there be a lag between seal registering chakra source and this?”

The man hummed approvingly, “Depending on how ‘hungry’ the seal is, but probably yes.”
She took another step back, trying to feel the difference like she did before casting *Naimaze-no jutsu*. Nothing. Another small step back. Nothing. Another-

“Here.” Naruto tiredly rubbed his temples. “It’s here and my head is gonna explode. I don’t know how you deal with your Inner, Sakura-chan. I just want to sleep for ages and we talked for some five minutes...”

Sasuke squinted at the two of them suspiciously, “Are you sure?”

“Damn right I am, ‘ttebayo.”

“I… don’t feel anything?” Sakura looked at them questioningly, “It’s just like any other place. I’m not a sensor type, sorry.”

“No one in clans is a shinobi, Haruno. Some things can be done without chakra too,” Sasuke said smugly - the bastard was lecturing her about it? - and came to stand by her side. “In the compound the lock was a pressure plate in the wall. See something similar?”

The very fact that Sasuke was asking for her input instead of just using his sharingan could mean two things: he was getting better about that whole I-don’t-need-your-help thing that drove her mad or his bloodshot eyes couldn’t fight the strain any longer. Sakura made a mental note to compare how low long Sasuke could use his magic eyes now to a week ago and threw a hopeful look at Naruto but he only shook his head. To be fair he looked exhausted. Talking with the Kyūbi might have finally managed to put a strain on his seemingly endless reserves.

She grabbed the blonde by the sleeve of his ridiculous orange jacket and pulled him closer because three pairs of eyes were totally better than two (sensei’s one didn’t count because he closed it and seemed to fall asleep mid blink which happened one or two times already so Sakura didn't fuss about it). Maybe she put a little bit too much force into it though.

Naruto stumbled into her and Sasuke like a barrel thrown downhill and together they slammed into the wall of the corridor. The blonde cursed and tried to hold onto the wall by pushing some chakra into his palms just before they went down in a pile of limbs then-

Tiny, barely audible click came from under his palms. Sakura felt a familiar Kyūbi's chakra swell and bluish lines of a seal sparked to life for a briefest of the moments, coloring the corridor with an eerie light.

A groan of rusty cogs filled her ears and in a mute fascination she watched the wall Naruto had indicated open like a jigsaw puzzle.

*You three are such shit magnets, long face~*

"Hime, what the hell?"

The rest of an angry tirade is swallowed by a thick brown carpet as the man whose tailbone so unceremoniously hit the floor rolls over and wails childishly. A mop of spiky snow-white hair covers his bulky figure whole, making him look like the last remnant of winter ready to melt away, but no one else present in the room really pays his antics any attention. Well, almost no one.

"Dad, if you leave one more oil print on the floor, I swear I'll tie you up and dump you at Mizukage's doorstep. And not in a fun way, you old pervert!" A twenty-something shinobi in slightly torn Kiri uniform graciously wiggles his perfectly manicured fingers at the man on the carpet. His smile is
sharp and promises pain.

"Ichhan, you wound me!" Jiraiya lets out a choking sound of disbelief but collects himself from the floor, just in case. He carefully rotates his still somewhat numb from their last spar shoulder and returns to his favorite spot on the couch. Except without Tsunade's lap to serve as a pillow for his woozy head the spot is none the better than any other.

The one who appears to be Kiri nin glares back but ultimately gives up, knowing Jiraiya has been a lost cause long before he was even born. Ichiru is used to his dad being a big dumbo. He has mom to balance his idiocy with her hotheadedness and, thanks gods, his father to be the voice of reason. At least someone in this house can use more than 50 percent of their brains.

Jiraiya - once again not the center of anyone's attention - begins to pout and before he has to physically remove this big baby out of the room Ichiru glowers, "Mizukage's doorstep. In the middle of wet slimy Mist." Jiraya predictably shuts up because there's nothing in the world that makes his old wounds ache as much as soggy climate of Water Country's hidden village. Well, Ame does that too, but Jiraiya won't even come close to the border of the Land of Dusk, so it doesn't count. Ichiru briefly wonders how come this man is a mastermind behind their most daring project while the pervert in question draws something in his sketchbook giggling as a five-year-old but, alas, this is partly his fault too. The poison really needs more testing before it's usable in real life combat.

He throws his head back to peer over the headrest of the couch and catches a barely couple of years older than him woman roll her eyes at the two of them as if it wasn't her who just pushed the old pervert's head off her lap mid healing jutsu and went for the door almost turning the couch over in the process. They stare at each other, two similar pairs of honey eyes unblinking until after a minute she finally yields, muttering, "I swear if I didn't remember that night with perfect clarity, I myself would believe you're Orochi's spawn."

Ichiru laughs at that, all perfect teeth and cute dimples that can make even Iwa scouts swoon. In his honest opinion that's the only usable thing his Y-chromosome donor left him.

He always laughs when Tsunade references that Dan-man - Ichiru won't ever call his sperm-donor a father - because his only other option is to go to Fire Country and spit on man's grave which will destroy a little too many plans his parents had made over the years. Still Ichiru remembers his mother's crying at nights when dad was away spying the hell out of shinobi alliances and father was busy making sure their hiding places were protected. She used to howl in her pillow and bite her lips to bloody mess when she thought no one could hear her, mourning the village that fucked everything up, her friends that died in fruitless wars, Dan who decided that being a martyr hero was more important than letting someone else lead that mission and fucking stay alive.

In all honesty Ichiru has no idea why his mom still cares about Konoha so much. Fat load of good it did her or any of its shinobi he had ever met (and he met many).

He doesn't believe in healing properties of time even if the medic in him knows where the truth lies, but when he smiles and Tsunade smiles back at him - not a strained, fake grimace from his early childhood, but a warmth embodied - Ichiru knows one thing. If his mother wants to save Konoha from itself, so be it. He's a healer first, but for her - and both his paternal figures that gave up their safety, social standing and became nukenin for two last Senju to survive - he'll walk to hell and back and bloody murder will be his name.

Oh, maybe he's spent too much time with Tessa recently.

Tsunade probably sees more than she should in his accented by bronze kohl eyes and finally stops her pacing. Ichiru is his mama's son and he's never been afraid to show it so instead of waiting for
her to come and settle back into the comfy old couch he stands up and grabs her into a hug. Her strong hands squeeze his ribs with the force of a printing press, betraying her nervousness and she lets a shaky exhale out. Their long hair - her dirty blonde and his almost white - mix together when Ichiru puts his head on her shoulder and asks at last, "Mom, what's up?"

"Someone opened the sanctuary in the estate again," and she sounds both relieved and mortified at once. It's something they've been waiting for, but at the same time it means the game is on.

Tsunade is a good three centimeters taller than him, so when she pulls back to make a perfunctory check on still giggling about something most likely lewd and absolutely produced by poison affected imagination Jiraiya, Ichiru sees a dotted pattern curl on her collarbone. He's quite decent with fūinjutsu, not on dad or father's level, but knows enough to figure it's a part of the seal grandma Mito had inked - some heir stuff. Important stuff.

Jiraiya perks up at the mention of the estate and Ichiru sees those gears turning even despite old man's altered mental state. Tsunade sees it too and lets go of her son completely, green chakra already beginning to bloom on her fingertips.

"Let's get your bloody hallucinogens out of his system, kid," she mutters and Ichiru follows obediently, tying his almost brushing the floor hair into a hefty double bun at the base of his neck. Together they isolate the chemicals that mess with man's perception depth and apparently sanity - Ichiru hopes sketches he has caught a glimpse of won't ever make into any of his dad's books - and get him back to normal in a span of ten minutes.

"Don't ask me to spar with you ever again, Icchan!" Jiraiya croaks rubbing his temples, but Tsunade doesn't let him finish.

“I want to make sure that's not someone from old farts' bloody secret army looking for the things they shouldn't in my house. Call your toads, Jiraiya, we have damn lot to do."

Ichiru laughs at old pervert's dumbstruck expression and shakes his head, "I'll go tell father. You two don't blow the house up and no toads on the carpet." Jiraiya just grins innocently, one bloody finger already hovering over the brown surface. "Mizukage's doorstep," Ichiru promises darkly and disappears in a flurry of golden pollen.

Chapter End Notes

Oh wow, took me long enough to get this chapter together. Real life has been crazy in these past months and in between of trying to keep my job and not go crazy from mental strain it did a number on me. Still alive tho.
I've rewritten this chapter three times and tbh there still are parts I'd change but I can't, I just can't. The story needs to progress so here it goes.
This weekend we hit 14k views and 700 kudos mark O.o Thanks you for your continuous support and nice comments, guys, you're keeping me going!
Love ya, Kay <3
a shadow on the wall (doesn't look like my shadow at all)

Chapter Summary

Don't get too close to monkeywartoys.

Chapter Notes

The song for this chapter is Wake Up by Yoav

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kakashi had never thought he would one day end up in the long abandoned house of Konoha’s Slug Princess. Neither had he ever expected to see Senju sanctuary with his own eyes. Eye. It was a legend, a myth even among the oldest clans of Konoha and somehow his pups found it, on their very first mission to boot.

His genin had already scrambled to their feet and were bickering in hushed whispers, gawking at the maze of spacious halls filled with shelves and stacks of scrolls upon scrolls barely visible in the uneven lightning coming from the corridor. It was the sight many shinobi would pay a small fortune to see and still Kakashi tuned the kids out. Of course it wasn’t the first time in his career when a mission took a sudden turn, but this was a D-rank. A genin team didn't find one of the long lost treasures of the village, it just didn't! And, alas, here he was, standing mere meters away from the entrance to where Senju secrets were kept.

If only his bullshit sense didn’t tingle so much… Well, it was a perfect teaching moment, wasn’t it?

Kakashi chewed on the inside of his cheek, but no words of wisdom came to his mind, probably spooked by the very idea of him actually doing something sensei-ish, so he just asked, “Team, what’s the third rule of shinobi?”

“A shinobi must see the hidden meanings within the hidden meanings!” the trio chanted almost in unison, usually forgetful Naruto included.

Oh. The girl absolutely deserves a treat for handling his remedial education so well.

“Look underneath the underneath.” Kakashi nodded, missing the way he thought of Sakura as he would of his ninen completely because he saw Sasuke blink, once again calling for sharingan to overflow his already red from the overuse eyes. Too well Kakashi knew where this path could lead so he amended, “that goes for other senses too, Sasuke-kun. You can’t rely solely on your dōjutsu.”

Uchiha squinted at the door and made a face as his irises faded to anthracite black, “That’s a fake.” He didn't say anything about sharingan and for now Kakashi decided to let him have his ignorance for a little while. While potentially dangerous, it was too soon for any permanent damage and he was sure Sakura had already noticed the side effects and no doubt would give her teammate a piece of her mind after they finish the mission. It felt good to know he wasn’t dealing with three inept rookies.
While Naruto inspected the entrance, cautiously sniffing at the air either in a misplaced attempt to copy Kakashi or because chakra transfusion into the key seal made his eyes water, the jōnin briefly wondered how Asuma and Kurenai’s teams were doing. Had their genin got over the adjustment phase and began behaving at least somewhat close to shinobi, not overpowered clan brats? He didn’t have to ponder for long though since both Naruto and Sakura visibly came to the same conclusion as Sasuke and put their hands up in the release handseal. Kakashi mirrored them instead of pulling up his hitaiate and nodded.

“Kai.”

The illusion hiding the trap wavered, melting like ice under the spring sun and leaving a narrow dilapidated archway crossed with ninja wire in its wake. The room behind it could barely pass for an office in terms of spaciousness, even less for an archive of any sort. In all honesty, it looked like another storage room save for a brittle kamidana. It caught Kakashi’s attention immediately because it seemed to be purposefully destroyed and a piece of dark blue fabric was sticking from the wooden rubble on the floor.

You three are such shit magnets, long face~

Sakura didn't even argue with Inner when her mocking echoed in their shared mindscape because all she could do was mutely stare into a filled with reddish light and stacks of scrolls hall. It was something outworldly and so beautiful until the very moment Kakashi-sensei reminded her: she was a shinobi. Then it kind of clicked - the estate’s layout was traditional and simple, there couldn’t by any means be a hall down the corridor.

And there was none.

When the illusion fell she and the boys silently followed Kakashi-sensei into the small space behind the archway, bending just a little to sneak below the ninja wire, and inspected the room cautiously. It was strange. It did not fit.

The wall where kamidana had used to hang was smeared with some sort of grime and smelled of chemicals and fire. There were splatters of blood on the floor. To add insult to injury they found another piece of old kimono fabric there, but this time it didn’t exactly surprise anyone. Someone clearly managed to get into Takara estate a while ago and this mysterious someone didn’t care for the mess they had left. But why?

Sensei’s reactions hinted he had an idea on who it could be or he at least suspected someone, but the jōnin didn’t seem ready to share. It was fine with Sakura, there had to be a whole lot of things she probably wasn’t supposed to even think about. Inner on the other hand? She was having a field day with wild guessing and Sakura graciously left her to it.

As they began to take apart the remainings of kamidana in search of any items of importance, she saw something that caught her undivided attention. With careful precision Sakura moved the remaining splinters out of the way and gently picked up a painting of a jungle on a piece of torn parchment. It was a picture of a path that went downhill, curving around crooked trees shrouded in vines and more moss, until thick canopy of the forest in the distance swallowed it whole. The picture somehow seemed both oppressive and ethereal at once because of the colors the artist used - almost everything including two small patches of sky where the branches parted was painted in some shade of crimson.

“What is this place?” Sakura whispered, captivated by the image. “It’s so…”
“Gloomy,” Naruto finished when she trailed off in the lack of words. And it was, to some extent.

“Hmm… I suppose it could be Land of Sound that lies south of Fire Country on Musei peninsula,” Kakashi-sensei explained, looking up from the remains of kamidana. He was sniffing at it and his brow was furrowed in what could be annoyance or surprise.

Naruto shifted on his feet uneasily. “Ne, ne, isn't it the place where people disappear?” He turned to Sakura as if he expected her to give him a quick rundown.

*Anything to add, walking encyclopedia? Inner chortled. Gotta uphold the reputation~*

Sakura was tempted to bare her teeth at the annoyingly sarcastic part of herself, but Naruto would no doubt take it personally, so she just hummed uncertainly. What did she know about the Land of Sound?

Before the team sort of overtook her room there used to be a map of all lands known to humanity hanging on her wall. It was a gift her dad had brought from the Land of Paper for her third birthday, the one he later used to explain where he would travel with caravans. Little Sakura simply wouldn't let him leave otherwise. By four she had memorized all trading routes he usually took and spent hours dreaming of going away with her dad and yet another caravan. Knowing where he would go and tracing the lines of roads on her map seemed to make time flow faster.

Sakura was much more familiar with lands that lay west of Konoha though because Haruno Kizashi rarely traveled southeast, most of his trips were to the Land of Rivers. Once every two years he followed Suna caravans into Wind Country territory to replenish dune pepper stock or made a detour to the Land of Spice - a small but ridiculously prosperous piece of Wind coastline claimed by Takigakure - to buy sugar. Every trip cost Harunos a small fortune but it usually paid off in a week after Kizashi returned. Land of Sound, on the other hand… to Sakura's memory her dad mentioned it only once - *it is*, he said, *a place any sane merchant would try to avoid.*

Inner, who was methodically plowing through long forgotten information she kept in the depths of their unconscious, perked up all of sudden. *Here it is~* she chirped gleefully, pushing her findings towards Sakura through the violently pulsing thread of their connection.

She staggered a bit from a rush of memories but, before her face got a little bit too intimate with singed floorboards, Sasuke stepped in front of her, effectively breaking her fall. By his thigh. Not that it was the first time Sakura got too close and personal with parts of Sasuke's anatomy, not with their team's training regimen… Just Sasuke stepping in - careful enough to make sure she didn't break her nose on his weapons pouch yet looking like he did no such thing - was something she still had trouble to account for.

Oh boy, he was so messed up. Sakura could only hope she and Naruto would be able to read him better with time. And maybe figure out how to help him out of the hole the village dug for him.

That train of thought was interrupted by gentle shimmering of a shadow on the wall at the very edge of her peripheral vision. By all means it wasn't *meant* to move that way since there was nothing to even cast it! *Weird.* Sakura blinked rapidly to clear her apparently blurry vision as she knelt on the floor, still unsure of her ability to stand upright after Inner had essentially dumped way too much information that used to be a filtered background noise on her.

Someone's hand (warm, skin scarless and slightly bronzed - Naruto) squeezed her shoulder gently and Sakura mechanically looked up to assure him she was okay. He was squinting at her with so much worry in his bright blue eyes, she felt compelled to grab him by the collar of his hideous jacket and shake a little. Or maybe hug him. How had he managed to stay so unjaded and open-hearted
when basically everyone including her back in the day (and here was her daily stab of guilt) treated him like dirt under their feet? In the end Sakura opted for a crooked smile and a weak pat on blonde's hand still lying on her shoulder.

“Inner dug us some info on the Land of Sound in my memories. Got me reeling for a moment while it settled,” she said, hoping Naruto or Kakashi-sensei wouldn't ask any hows and whys, at least not now. Sasuke usually was kind of skittish when it came to Sakura's bright and suppressed half so she expected him to stay silent. He did.

Sensei stopped nosing through what had been left of kamidana by then and was once again watching the way they interacted with interest. Sakura was sure he did even though she could only see one fifth of his face. It was kind of funny to try and imagine how his other eye squinted under his hitaiate, tugging at the scar she caught a glimpse of, maybe he was even smiling a bit? It almost felt like she was trying to see a full picture with only one piece of a puzzle and it in itself was a challenge. And while Sakura hated puzzles, challenges? She loved the thrill.

“And what do you have for us, Sakura-chan?” Here it was, that slight chuckle when sensei said her name. He was smiling.

Point to Sakura.

She shrugged like a wet dog, shaking the rest of numbness off and flashed a sharp grin at his teammates, “I've got LOTS of stuff.”

When she glanced back at the wall before reporting, it was empty. Blurry vision then.

“Land of Sound lies in the middle of Musei peninsula, south of Fire Country border. It’s surface area is supposed to be about one hundred thousand square kilometers, but most of it is unsuitable for human settlements because of the thickness of the forest, humidity and the amount of deadly plants and animals. It shares border with the Land of Bones in the east, Sugar Cane in the southeast, Silk in the southwest and Trepang Isle in the west. Its name comes from the whistling sound whooping monkeys produce when they notice prey…”

If anyone asked, Sasuke would swear he had no idea Haruno could be this smart. Thankfully, nobody asked because admitting it to anyone besides his team would be a devastating blow to his ego. For years Sasuke thought himself to be above her and other members of his crazy fanclub who only knew how to chase away all things living with a sickening stench of horrendous perfume and, therefore, since the formation of Team Seven the reality continued to hit him hard.

Haruno turned out to be a great impersonator.

Behind a plain civilian-born bookworm with little to no physical prowess was a fighter. Sure, she was weaker than him or blonde Uzumaki, but stamina could be built up and skills could be honed with effort and discipline; in this she wasn’t lacking. In a week since they had begun training together he’d seen her put more effort in exercises than during all years in Academy combined and no matter how many times she failed, she pushed herself up and went on. That was someone Sasuke grew to treat with a grudging respect.

And then here was ‘smarts’ part.

Some could say her symbiosis with Inner was cheating - she essentially had a second witness for every action and event she happened to be present for, the one who could dig basically any detail
from the depths of her memory. But as all powerful techniques it came with a price. And, really, it still was her own memory.

In short, Sasuke did his best to crush a budding spark of envy by rationalizing over its source because, while he had no way to reproduce a bit of rumor he overheard in the streets when he was seven, he also wasn’t on the verge of fainting when all those disjointed scraps of information settled in his brain. On the other hand, even if he by some cursed miracle could access it, there was no way he’d be able to systematize and make a coherent report out of it in a matter of minutes. Nah, Sasuke wasn’t envious.

He was awed.

“...so uncle Tatsuta told dad they decided against buying sugar from the Land of Spice because the travel was too expensive. Back then we were still at war with Suna, so the route through the Land of Sound was the only real option. Then, when in 2012 another caravan hadn’t returned from the Land of Sugar Cane, grandma Akame decided Haruno won’t use Land of Sound trade route any longer. Family business took a serious blow, but more people started disappearing so since 2015 Fire Country merchant union won’t even issue an insurance to anyone crossing the jungle. Even if they hire shinobi. Dangerous to enter, easy to get lost, something like tha-” Sakura stumbled mid-sentence when she caught Sasuke’s slightly unfocused stare. “Too much trade stuff? Sorry!”

“That was very… educational,” Kakashi-sensei waved her concerns off. “Your knowledge might actually come in handy if we ever take a caravan escort mission, Sakura-chan. Anything else on the topic not trade-related though?”

She squinted, deep in thought. Most of the times she had heard about the Land of Sound it was in the context of family business, however… yes, there was one more thing she overheard a three years ago at the Academy Parent-Child Day.

“There is a legend Senju came from the Land of Sound. Ino’s dad said so and he’s a clan head and is working at T&I, he knows… stuff,” Sakura finished lamely. In the light of the whole ‘see underneath the underneath’ moment blind trust in Yamanaka-san’s words seemed childish. Still the words were said and there was no taking them back so Sakura could at least own them like she meant them. She smiled with the confidence she didn’t feel and opened her mouth to continue but...

“Ne, ne,” Naruto suddenly started nodding so vigorously she began getting worried it could fall off. “I’ve heard it too on Konoha Founding Day last July, ’ttebayo! Old hag Kisaragi kept grumbling for days about those Senju and living in a jungle and how couldn’t they choose a place for the village where it isn’t so damp and rainy all summer!”

“Then it makes sense to have a painting here. But there’s also a problem - it was a part of the family scroll and it’s missing.” Sasuke pointed out grumpily.

Sakura had never heard of such thing as a family scroll. Yet again, before she could ask and possibly make a fool of herself for not knowing something important, Naruto beat her to it. “Eh? What’s that?”

To her surprise Sasuke didn’t make a face or look at Naruto as if he was deranged but merely explained, patiently too. “It’s a sheet of parchment where all clan members are listed. In some clans when a child is born, the Elders place a drop of its blood on the paper near the name and then it shows if the person is alive or dead.”
Sakura noticed that even Kakashi-sensei seemed interested in that bit of information a little more than usual.

*He’s from an old clan too, isn’t he?~* Inner naturally was one step further in Sakura’s train of thought. Hatake was a familiar name even before Team Seven so Sakura probably heard it at one of the family dinners, maybe from uncle Tatsuta or cousin Joen. They both worked with Fire farmers that imported root vegetables in Konoha so it had to be them. *On the other hand, shinobi population of Hatake family thinned through wars as it happened to many clans. They could have abandoned that tradition or lost the scroll~*

Sakura noted that thought down for further research while Sasuke continued his historical overview.

“Family scroll holds information of grave importance. That’s why its location always is one of the most well-kept secrets - it could blow up the cover of shinobi or worse if anyone with some twisted kekkei genkai gets their hands on it.”

*Oh~*

“Some people in aunt Rensa's clan could,” Sakura murmured. It made sense. In the right hands blood could become a devastatingly effective weapon.

All things combined, her team’s findings mounted up to a pretty ugly picture. Sakura sat on the floor cross-legged, not in the slightest minding the grime her red dress was getting into. She'd wash it later and now there were much more important topics to think about. “So someone got past Takara estate blood wards, broke into the sanctuary and stole the family tree scroll.”

“But why anyone would do it if there’s only one Senju person left, ‘ttebayo?”

“To make sure it stays this way,” Sasuke suggested grimly.

Even Inner had courtesy to smother her curses. It just… hit too close to home to be a coincidence, didn't it?

“Maa, aren’t you getting a little ahead of yourself, my cute little genin?” Kakashi-sensei chuckled in a faux cheerful tone that Sakura came to recognize as ‘shut up and run for your life’. “Our job here is to take out the trash and bring back heirlooms, not dig up conspiracy theories.”

What he meant probably was ‘not here and not now’, but the idea was already planted firmly in Sakura’s head and Inner was here to back her suspicions up.

*D-rank, she spat bitterly, is it really? Who would have half a mind to believe it all is just an accident? ~*

Nanagusa-sensei said the mission was waiting for us. *If it was Team Ten they would notice something’s fishy, Sakura agreed. Shikamaru certainly would know about clan stuff and Ino would have kittens if she could only get her hands on a piece of the Soul of the Night. Come think of it, Hinata would recognize it too and Shino and Kiba are both from noble clans, they’d know something is up.*

Inner smirked at that. *So you think we were sent here because we’re a band of misfits, long face?~*

*Well, we are one of three rookie genin teams.* Sakura’s mind was reeling as she ran through possible reasons for why Team Seven even got to the estate. Recently unsealed one with evident traces of break in that could have a connection not only to Senju but another prominent Konoha clan as well. *Arguably, we are the most inexperienced and more likely to never catch on the discrepancies.*
Someone thinks we’re hopeless ones, you can say it, darling~ Inner wasn’t beating around the bush any longer.

Aren’t we? And oh girl, wasn’t Sakura bitter about it. She, Sasuke and Naruto had so much potential to be something great but all this potential was buried under the experiences that came close, sometimes way too close to cripple them once and for all.

Well, our juicy sensei certainly doesn’t think so~

Sakura almost physically flinched, mortified by the image her inner part was thinking way too giddily of, and backed out of her mindscape completely. For now it was better to leave Inner alone, at least until she worked those unhealthy imageries out and stashed them were sun didn’t shine and Sakura didn’t reach.

Ah, hell, what wouldn’t I give to talk this out with Ino, she cursed to herself and scrambled to her feet when sensei made a signal for retreat. Their job in Takara estate was done.

She followed Sasuke into the corridor and turned to tell Naruto to hurry up. He flashed her a brilliant smile, tucked the bandage on his left foot back into the shabby sandals that barely fit him anymore and was already moving to stand up when something caught his eye in the farthest corner of the room. He reached out for it and a whistling sound, rising by every second, tore through the heavy silence.

A smell of burnt flesh permeated the air.

Naruto fell on the floor with an inhuman howl.

It felt like someone punched him in the ear with a corkscrew. Again.

He tried to push it out, wring it away from him but there was nothing there and the pain never stopped. His hand was on fire and the agony pulsed through his whole body with the force of electric current, burning him from the inside and out, splitting his skull apart. It went on and on forever until the only thing he could plead for was to gods, make it stop!

“His hand is burning!”

“Kuchiyose! Ūhei, quick!”

“Sensei, that's not-”

“Alpha, I can't-!”

“Fox can. Haruno! Open his eyes, goddamnit!”

Suffocating coldness, bitter and sharp, shot up his cheeks, prying his eyelids apart. Black turned red and it spun and spun and then… there was nothing.

Only decades of tireless honing of his reflexes saved Kakashi from falling face first into the lush forest moss. Wait. Moss?

He jolted upright, a kunai in hand and fight or flight instinct screaming ‘danger’, only to stumble over the massive roots of a Hashirama tree and freeze at the sight before him.
-doing *something*, girl, and only that is why the kit is still alive.

“But he is still fucking bleeding!”

“Shut up, Inner! Kurama-sama, how can we help?”

Kakashi stared slack-jawed at two Sakuras, one bright to the point it was painful to look at her and swearing profusely, the other - dull grey and bowing politely before… Nausea hit him full force and the kunai fell from his suddenly weak fingers, clunking on a torn piece of a chain-link fence at his feet.

**I can regrow burnt flesh and skin but you need to make him let go of the whistle. Damn monkeys and their wartoys!**

“But Kurama-sama, we tried! We couldn’t pry his fingers open!”

Panic welled in his chest and Kakashi bit the inside of his cheek to stop himself from crying for Sakuras to run.

The Kyūbi was sitting on its haunches mere meters away from them, barred only by a thin fence and nothing more. At any moment the demon could rip it apart, break free and squish the girls with a flick of its tails that were flashing through the air almost imperceptibly fast, weaving a thin thread of ruby chakra above its head. Kakashi swallowed the blood that began to trickle down the back of his throat and with shaking fingers tugged another kunai out of his weapon pouch. Was he fast enough to rip his hitaiate off before the demon attacked? He would create a distraction, buy some precious seconds for Sakura before the Fox turned on her, this time he won’t fail-

**I will not bring harm to you and your kits, Hatake. Hush.** The whole forest seemed to shake when the Fox exhaled tiredly and lay on the ground, shrinking to at least half of its previous size. The earth under Kakashi’s feet vibrated with the power of impact.

The man blinked. It knew his name?

“Sensei, don’t look him in the eyes, he has *aversion* to sharingan.” Kakashi’s uncovered eye darted to the right where it met Sasuke’s red ones. The tomoe were spinning slowly, reminding him, but of what?

**I swore to the girl, I will not touch kit’s own. He does not have much and of what he has I will not rob him**, the beast rumbled.

Kit… was Naruto. A thread of chakra that Fox produced led to a tear in the fence. It squeezed through bent metal and disappeared in the tall grass until it reached where a limp body of a blond boy was strewn across the fallen tree. Bright Sakura was sitting on the peeling off bark and with careful precision guided the thread to Naruto’s charred and bleeding forearm.

Someone hurt his Pack!

The panic began to subside, letting common sense and rightful anger to take over the fear that lived in Kakashi since he was fourteen. Memories rushed back, clicking into their rightful places and he growled, “What happened?”

Some part of him was still deep down there, mortified of what he stood against, but right now it was inconsequential. Only Pack mattered and if the Fox was willing to help (it was, he remembered, willing to share its knowledge and power to the kids before at least)...
Kyūbi sighed and lowered its head on the front legs. It smelt of anger, exhaustion and… worry?

“I brought you along on accident,” Sasuke replied succinctly.

“His hand’s still burning!” Sakura who must be Inner crowed in between the string of colorful expletives.

The other one turned her back to the Fox as if it wasn’t the demon that had destroyed Konoha twice and stared at Kakashi pleadingly. “Whatever is hurting Naruto needs to be taken away but we are helping Kurama-sama to mold the chakra outside the seal and Sasuke is keeping us in here. It has to be you, sensei.”

If not for a Kyūbi lying behind her back Kakashi would totally think this cheesy one liner from hero novels was some twisted genjutsu joke by Kurenai. The Fox, however, was still there and it was absolutely serious.

The kit picked up one of monkey whistles, Hatake. You do not need me to explain what it is, do you?

Oh no, it didn’t. Kakashi had a misfortune of getting too close and personal with one of Konoha’s most dangerous weapons during the Third Shinobi War to never want to relive the experience. He still had scars on his back to prove it and it just grazed him a bit. To know Naruto was holding one… It should have killed him!

The Fox nodded at him sagely without opening its eyes. Do not touch this thing with your bare hands once you out there, Hatake. It will burn you alive in a matter of seconds and I will not be there to protect you. My reserves are sealed away far too good for that and I am not a healer anyway.

Before Kakashi could even say anything, the demon suddenly drew in a deep breath and bellowed, OUT! Both Sakuras clung to the fallen tree holding Naruto’s prone body and Sasuke plain flattened himself to the ground, but the gale that broke free from the Fox’s maw only ruffled their hair before bludgeoning Kakashi in the chest and out of the seal.

“Fucking hell,” he swore brokenly, taking a leaf out of Sakura’s Inner’s book, and pushed his body upright by the sheer power of will. His head was pounding as if he lost a drinking contest to Gai where the only alcohol was Yanagi’s concoctions and his chest was numb just like that time when Kumo shinobi had decided that breaking his ribs was going to make him spill ANBU codes. Then something wet and warm lathered him with more wet right over his mask and the reality crashed on Kakashi with the force of Gai’s Konoha Tsumuji Senpū. He rolled over to his knees and gasped, “Ūhei, status?”

“You an-nd the kids fainted thirty seconds ago, Alpha,” the dog reported dutifully even though his ears were twitching, betraying his nervousness. “I tried my b-best but N-naruto-kun is n-no good. I-”

“I’m handling it. Call Bisuke and Pak forth, I need a fireproof containment scroll in twenty.”

The easiest part was done. Now it was time for extraction. On some level Kakashi was glad the kid was out because what he had to do wasn’t pretty.

_Nineteen._
Behind him two pops announced his summons’ arrival.

_Eighteen._

Muttering to himself, Bisuke began carving the seal on an empty scroll.

_Seventeen._

Kakashi jerkily moved his hitaiate up.

_Sixteen._

He dragged the mask down to his chin. The smell of burnt flesh hit him full force.

_Fifteen._

Two fingerless gloves fell onto the wooden floor with a thud.

_Fourteen._

Pakkun jumped on Kakashi’s left shoulder and his chakra entered the jagged flow, stabilizing the spikes that opening of sharingan had caused.

_Thirteen._

Kakashi reached out for Naruto’s hand, careful not to touch the skin that was burning like dried thatch only to regrow and melt away again.

_Twelve._

He scooped some ash from the floor and smeared it onto the scroll Busuke pushed towards him.

_Eleven._

With gentleness he reserved for a newborn puppies Kakashi placed Naruto's hand palm up on the scroll.

_Ten._

The uneven seal spit some sparks, but the paper didn’t go up in flames, only darkened slightly where it made contact with fire.

_Nine._

Chakra, obedient to the will of its master, rushed to Kakashi’s fingertips, swirling and reforming.

_Eight._

Shadows, cast by thin needles of lightning, billowed on the walls of the corridor, morphing into alien shapes.

_Seven._

Bisuke finished the last symbol on the scroll and barked, “Now!”

_Six._
Shocked by a sudden stab of lightning muscles contracted, pushing boy's fingers open with a nauseating sound of tearing flesh.

Five.

A small wooden figurine took the whistling to almost ultrasound levels and Kakashi's summons flopped on the floor whining and trying to cover their ears. He cursed but went on.

Four.

The jōnin grabbed a senbon and shoved the figurine off Naruto's palm with such strength that the projectile almost pierced the wood.

Three.

Shadows loomed closer, spiraling on the walls by Kakashi's side.

Two.

Barely able to hold the concentration in spite of a headsplitting headache, he removed Naruto's hand - still charred and bleeding but, thanks Kyūbi, not burning anymore - from the scroll and clapped his hands, sloppily forming a handseal.

One.

“Fūnyū no Jutsu,” Kakashi rasped and damned whistle finally disappeared into the scroll. “Done.”

“Whoever sent a genin team into a potentially hostile environment should receive a good whipping, Kakashi,” Bisuke said quietly and unsummoned himself with a silent pop.

Pakkun just swatted man’s hitaiate back down and jumped off his shoulder. “Cookie is right, you know. You better find out what those chūnin were thinking.”

“On it,” Kakashi groaned and almost fell to the side. The whole affair didn’t even last a minute, yet it dwindled his reserves as rare ANBU assignments did. He tiredly put his mask back into its rightful place and tried to shuffle closer to the kids, supported by Ūhei's shaking body.

Sakura and Sasuke were still hovering over Naruto’s head, staring into his blue eyes emptily. In uneven light Kakashi more guessed than really saw a single tomoe lurking there - the only proof of the boy still being held in a trance-like state by a sharingan user. The man made sure Sasuke's glazed over eyes hadn’t started to bleed and finally let himself lean against the closest wall.

Panic came at him and ebbed away in waves as all possibilities mutely registered in his brain during his silent vigil: Sasuke had a real chance to flip out at least twice today, Naruto had almost died - would have died if not for the Fox - and gods only knew how Sakura managed to peacefully coexist with such jutsu binding her. Every step, every word was a risk. Why he was given such a task?! Minute after long minute Kakashi set there, slowly taking the mission apart while he waited for the Fox to bring Naruto's hand back to its unscarred state with Sakuras' help. Too many factors he simply couldn’t have accounted for, too many forks in the road to predict, but a single image continued to stand behind his closed eye. There, on the side of bird shaped whistle that by any means shouldn't have ever been in Takara estate, was a single kanji - Saru.

Monkey war toys, Kakashi thought bilefully. You have a lot of explaining to do, Sarutobi.
Shadows crept up the wall the jōnin had chosen as his temporary support system. Their advance was slow and steady until they shrouded him and his summons. Grey covered the human in a two-dimensional bubble that grew bigger and paler until it burst and three thin strands shot towards slowly coming round genin. Shadow tendrils touched the children gently, almost reverently wiping the ash from their faces and smoothing the crow’s feet that had already begun to settle on their faces.

They would remember, but they will not break. Not today.

A grey-eyed woman in a standard Leaf uniform sighed and tiredly lowered her numb hands from a Rat seal. She rolled her shoulders to get rid of the stiffness there and stretched until her spine popped, then all but slumped on the bony torture device that T&I members called a chair either from shortsightedness or due to professional quirks the department tended to bring out in people.

“Mission accomplished.” There was no satisfaction in her voice, only weary acceptance of a shitstorm that was to come.

“Finally. Here, your nose is bleeding,” Inoichi said and offered her a wet towel which she gingerly took. “How did it go?”

“They should’ve been in and out of the place in two hours time. Instead it took them almost four and I had to dive in. How do you think it went, taichō?” she muttered in response and buried her face into the towel.

Inoichi’s lips twisted unprettily. “Teri, explain.”

“Someone dropped a monkey whistle in the room we couldn’t get into and Uzumaki went right for it. Black Grasses almighty, I never knew the thing was that loud,” came muffled reply. The chūnin wiped the trails of dried blood from her neck and balled the towel before throwing it in a trash can. “On the bright side, just as we’ve assumed Uchiha can do something to the seal and the Fox actually cooperates. It healed the damage at least. I can’t say intentionally or not, you better see it yourself”.

Metal legs of a chair scraped loudly on the concrete floor as the woman turned to her boss and lowered her head, giving him access to her temples. She studied the reflections of a room in the surface of hitaiate tied to her left thigh until a familiar pressure settled at the base of her skull. She took a deep breath and prepared for the jutsu to enter her mind.

With her having relevant memories unshielded and close to the surface the process was hardly taxing on both of them and still Inoichi wasn’t a fan of such measures. Not on his subordinates. Hopefully, this intrusion of privacy was worth it.

“Come on, taichō, I’m not made of glass.”

Inoichi chuckled at that and adjusted his stance. “I know you aren’t, Nanagusa-kun. Saiko Denshin.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hi guys, Kay here! Past month has been intense but now I'm getting back on track so here's the new chapter! Also in past two days I went through previous chapters and
cleaned them up a bit and reuploaded ch 1-6 that now are beta'd by awesome mpatientdreamr <3
A/N2: I hope to get another chapter some time in May and maybe link a map of Konoha and the world I'm working on (nothing fancy, just worldbuilding stuff, but if you're interested, I'm happy to share)
A/N3: Thank you all for your amazing feedback! You may not realize it, but it's a huge inspiration boost and I can't wait to share more of this story with you!
Much love, Kay <3
Naruto was truly happy. Why wouldn't he be?

Hardly anywhere he could feel as safe as in Kakashi-sensei’s apartment that probably had protections better than the Hokage residence. Also he just had lots of takoyaki and there were Sakura-chan’s feet resting on his lap. The rest of Sakura-chan was draped over Sasuke, who did a horrible attempt at pretending like he was braiding her hair. Everyone in the room knew he was too deep in his half-sleep half-trance state to actually do something, but saw no reason to point it out, especially Naruto.

**Exposure therapy**, Kurama rumbled deep and tired inside his mind. She is good at it, kit.

All Naruto could do was agree and close his eyes, content on staying this way until sensei got too tired of them in his private space and sent them all home. Neither he nor Sasuke didn't have anyone to come back to, so…

As if reading his thoughts, Sasuke shivered, his fingers flexed in Sakura-chan's hair (shy of painful judging by her expression of interrupted bliss) and a barely audible whimper reached Naruto's ears. Nightmares suck, the blonde confided in his mental companion and reached out to pry Sasuke's hands from Sakura-chan's poor scalp. It wasn't the first time he had done so this evening.

The mission they'd completed today was somewhat wacky to be honest and it changed something in all four of them, not just Sasuke.Broken seals, unknown tea-spilling intruders and weapons of the last war - it all was nowhere close to the set of features associated with the first D-rank new genin usually got as a shakedown mission. Thanks to Kurama and his awesome teammates Naruto hadn't lost his arm (he refused to think what would end up of him if the Spirit hadn't contained the fire and healed him back until there were almost no scars left) and still there were things chakra and sheer determination couldn’t heal.

Kakashi-sensei seemed the most unchanged by the whole shebang but Naruto was sure it was just another mask. He didn’t exactly remember what happened after he grabbed the whistle, only vague images and surges of panic mixed with barely contained rage that bled through the cocoon of Kurama’s power. He knew it wasn’t Sakura - Inner was a bright presence by his side the whole time and Sakura-chan never felt emotions this strongly. It wasn’t Sasuke either - there was no fear in him at that moment, only resolve and don’t you dare to die and she won’t let it happen.
Which left sensei.

He and I, we have a history, kit.

Kurama was just an echo in Naruto’s head because it was way too difficult to be at two places at once, but his cryptic statement peaked boy’s interest enough to slide down the wall until his head rested on Sasuke’s shoulder and slowly drift into the semi consciousness.

Whatcha mean?

The Fox seemed to shift somewhere far away, You know what happened on the Memorial Day, do you not? He sounded quite unhappy. Mournful.

I was born. Mom died. Dad died. Naruto tried to be as detached from the actual meaning of his words as he could because it hurt. He remembered what Sakura-chan had said - he should not hate, it would only hurt even more and not only him. Kurama knew, of course, because he was inside Naruto’s head and also…

Many people died, kit. It would be easy to say it was not my fault but... it was. I was ripped out of Kushina and controlled by those damn eyes- he growled and Naruto instinctively sank lower in an attempt to look smaller on the outside too. Sakura’s fingers wrapped around his wrist but Kurama was already talking again, taking all Naruto’s attention back to what happened inside his head. I am the Mirror of the World. What is given to me, I return nine-fold. He had only hate, this Uchiha, hate and sorrow and he wanted Konoha to drown in it. I made it happen.

You… You remember it, don’t you?

Every person. With perfect clarity.

And the one who did it to you?

He kept his face hidden behind the mask. Coward, Kurama scoffed indignantly, as if I wouldn’t feel the taint in his blood. Gone mad with pain, gone mad with power… In Uchihas these two go hand in hand.

Naruto had no idea what it meant, but it seemed to be important, so he shelved that bit for later. You said you and Kaka-sensei-

He was your parents’ last living student, but that is not my story to tell. Minato was already dead by the time Hatake broke through the barrier and he was too late to save Kushina. A reckless human, he still helped her seal me into your body even though they both knew it would kill her. If not for him, my spirit would have been broken in halves.

He saw the worst of what I can become up close, kit. He stared in my eyes when the seal swallowed me and words I said... Hatake Kakashi has every right to fear and hate me. His grief is a heavy burden to carry.

Every story has many sides to it, Naruto remembered Iruka-sensei say. It made sense. Why someone would want Konoha to burn down? What the village has done to that Uchiha? It must be something really bad and cruel, he wondered.

Village people thought the Kyūbi to be a demon that mindlessly destroyed their homes and families. They hated Naruto because they thought he was a demon too, and treated him like shit because of it.
His whole life Naruto wanted to prove them wrong and show them that he deserved love too. Even if he blamed someone for all the crap he got, it was mostly himself. People told him he was a bad, vile thing for as long as he remembered himself and that was what he believed in until his Team came along.

But that was him. And what if - just a thought - what if Kurama was sealed in someone else like, for example… Sasuke?

Naruto shuddered and his eyes flew open at the prospect. Suddenly everything clicked and he could see why Kurama was so wary of his teammate. Just a week ago it could as well end with a burnt out crater circled with Konoha Wall. If he was honest with himself, it probably still could.

Being in a team with Sasuke felt like what Nakadachi-san from okiya in the lower Flower District called ‘dancing on a slippery ground’. Maybe ‘playing with fire’ was a more suitable term though. Sasuke had no family left. His home was taken from him. Most people saw him as a walking gene pool with a fortune that in a matter of years would attract gold diggers like flies.

Naruto absently rubbed his neck with the hand that wasn’t caught in Sakura-chan’s vice-strong grip. He looked at her, the memories of Sasuke’s crazy fanclub resurfacing, and winced. Ah, it already did.

**Now you see what I meant, kit,** Kurama grumbled unhelpfully. **Uchiha equals danger. He might care for you in his twisted Uchiha way and still, be careful around this one.**

Naruto smiled crookedly and, in his usual fashion, did the exact opposite of what Kurama had probably meant. He twisted, sitting upright, gently dislodged Sakura-chan’s feet from his lap, then caught her and owlishly blinking awake Sasuke by their elbows and dragged with him towards the couch. He toppled his teammates onto absolutely not expecting something like this Kakashi-sensei and fell on top of the mess of human limbs, laughing, ”Puppy pile!”

Needless to say they ended up leaving sensei’s place way after the darkness set in. **Sakura-chan is a genius,** Naruto thought with a smile as he skipped across the roofs of the Market District by her side, **exposure therapy is the best.**

Kakashi barely settled back into his ju-u-ust a little bit more than usual welcoming and still warm couch after his pups left with ninken in tow, when a presence of familiar chakra snapped him back to attention. **No rest for the wicked, huh,** he grumbled and dragged his body back up.

“Nanagusa-san?” He opened the door uneasily, not entirely sure what else that woman could bring onto his poor head. Her chakra flickered and died down into a small non-threatening spark - a technique T&I members used to put their targets at ease.

“Ah, cut it, Kakashi.” Her lips quirked in a tired smile as she dropped the pretense of polite formality. “Have a moment? There’s something we should discuss.”

No, it totally couldn’t be anything good.

“Come in then,” he stepped back and gestured a stiff welcome, not happy with the idea of anyone beside his genin entering. Did he put the cups and takoyaki containers away? Could he trust her with seeing it?

“I won’t be long.”
“Still won’t do me no good if Genma hears us hanging out here and runs to your husband screaming
you and I had a clandestine meeting at my place,” he shook his head wearily, trying his best for
nonchalant. The very thought was eugh.

Thankfully, Teri didn’t take it as an innuendo (and he knew she could have just to make him
squirm), but rather laughed as she gently closed the door and pointedly leaned on the wall beside it. It
was her way of showing she wasn’t interested in intruding further and Kakashi couldn’t be more
grateful for it.

“Dōjin is busy making sure Iwa recalls their demolition squads away from our border with Rice and
he knows men rarely interest me. Perks of being married to a diplomat, you know.”

Kakashi very carefully didn’t ask whether those perks included Kuroyama-san’s frequent absences
from Konoha or her still being on duty all year round even eight years after tying the knot. The lack
of little Kuroyamas or Nanagusas running around Hokage Tower and T&I won him a small fortune
off the betting pool as it was, so Kakashi didn’t pry. He probably knew the answer anyway.

Judging by Teri’s crooked smile, she caught the whiff of his thoughts. Infuriating woman, she was.
He hated how she could make him feel like a startled genin when in reality she was barely seven
years older than him and still a chūnin after twenty years of service when his ranks skyrocketed well
before he had hit puberty. She was smart, dangerously so, yet somehow managed to escape any
promotion opportunity thrown at her. It he didn’t know better, he’d think she had some Nara blood
in her, just enough to pull it off.

“You’re thinking too loud, Kakashi. Probably need to add a foil cap to your mask if you want to
keep your secrets safe in this village,” she murmured, shaking her head. “Your people skills, ah,
what’s ever been there of it, are rusty.” With a wave of a hand she silenced his retort and changed the
topic of the conversation abruptly. “Your name’s at the top of the rumor mill lately. Something’s
giving you trouble?”

“Not more than usual,” he shrugged uncertainly. Questions were piling up like an avalanche in Snow
Country so Kakashi decided to take the matters into his own hands. “You hardly leave T&I these
days, Teri. What do I owe the pleasure?”

“The mission I got you.” When Kakashi’s eye met hers, instead of usual grey he found indigo blue, a
sure sign of… anger? Nervousness? Joy? It was so long since they last had a heart to heart talk. “As
soon as you fled,” her lips briefly curved in a sharp-toothed smirk, but he was still too busy trying to
read her to make any kind of defensive retort, “Hagane run off like there was Puppet Corps platoon
after him. I shadowed him a bit to see where he went.”

“To where?” Kakashi’s voice was perfectly calm, but underneath the collected facade gears were
turning, fueled by unadulterated panic. Hokage? Root?

“Yamanaka Inoichi.”

“Fuck.” It came out faster than he was able to catch, terrifying him. He really was rusty if a simple
conversation with her could make him confess more than Kumo interrogators had ever managed.

“He simply keeps tabs on your team, that's all.” There was a hand on the wall, some five centimeters
from his bicep and the lack of actual contact was the only reason he didn’t automatically lash out.
But Teri knew better than to touch him. Generally, she just knew too much, damn T&I woman.

“How do you know?”
“Hush. From my experience, he is a sensible one and, Kakashi, I’ve been working for him for more than twenty years. Inoichi-taichō isn’t the type of man who would play with kids’ lives. Not when the stakes are this high.”

But Hokage is. Root is, was implied if left unsaid, because she did know Kakashi just as well as someone once assigned to oversee his mental state could. She sounded so sure while Kakashi was falling apart, terror clawing on his insides mercilessly, that he shuddered. It all was coming back to him, down to the sickening taste on his tongue and an itch of unfinished seal array on his neck.

He wanted to run, to claw at his fragile skin, to rip out the eye that held all he had seen in Root down to every horrific detail, he truly wanted, but…

“Kakashi, breathe.”

Teri’s firm, commanding voice snapped him back to reality as she left his personal space completely. The sound of her order, the very words were the same and it eased the deathly grip on his throat.

“Your Team is not compromised.”

The years might color her hair grey and she might grow it out from the unkempt mess he still remembered from his teen years, but she remained the same - not willing to let her ‘cases’ break. The woman on a self-appointed mission that she had chosen well before he even made genin had already saved him once, probably was doing it again now.

Nanagusa Teri had met him when he was fourteen and empty eyed on the barely finished and already pointless monument of Yondaime Hokage’s head. She was empty just as him, but still took the brush away from his fingers and told him, no, ordered - to live.

She had never asked, maybe because Kakashi was somewhat of Konoha’s most famous disaster kid with nearly ninety percent success rate, maybe because she didn’t need it. She spoke instead, raw and angry, of the help he should have received long ago. Her words echoed through his mind, filling the emptiness with a jumble of obscenities and medical terms. As the days went he kept coming there - looking down at the ravaged village and seeing Kushina’s blood on his hands - and Teri kept talking, filling that void with stories of other people’s lives. She sat with him there, watching the place that had betrayed them both in unfathomable ways grow back, and spoke, letting him keep his silence.

One day he, too tired after another ANBU run in with Kumo but unable to sleep, had sought Teri out only to find her at the cenotaph. As usual, he listened, even though this time she wasn't talking about healthcare and the way smoking made lungs go black and all the medical stuff she had never put to use but could recite in her sleep probably. This time it was personal.

With her silent permission he stayed only to find out that her great-grandfather who had used to lead an assault squadron in the First and Second wars hadn’t been able sleep at nights because of what he’d seen and done till the very day the war claimed his sanity. Of how he never received help. Of how he had forgotten the names of his own daughter and the rest of the family but still wanted to protect his village. Of how Teri missed him, even though she could barely remember his face anymore too.

Of her grandfather - man of unnamed clan - who had his head so high in the clouds and research that he hadn’t noticed his wife’s struggles until that family shattered like a piece of glass. Of how he met his granddaughter for the first time some year and a half before the Kyūbi rampage. How she saw him suffer from the same illness as her great-grandfather had and how the village and the clan both
swiped it under the rug after his death.

Of how she despised him for disowning her mother. Of how she wished he had taught her more.

She stood up to leave at some point but took Kakashi's hand instead and led him to that dark cold stone. With his fingers she traced the name of his sensei and told him to breathe. To let it out. She stayed there while Kakashi cried, grasping on the unfeeling granite and choking on the words he couldn't say. That was the first time he cried since his father's death.

Teri was one of four people in his adult life that had seen his face and the only one still alive.

“It is unhealthy to cling to the dead,” she had recited from some damned book her grandmother probably used to read to her when she had been three and too bored by the fairytales already, “but nothing about being shinobi is. In our minds, they are alive until we forget them. If this belief is a tool that helps you to stand up in the mornings and fight for your village, use it.”

He met Nanagusa Teri at the cenotaph for years after that as often as his ANBU missions allowed him a break. Sometimes they spoke to their deceased, their ghosts and family, the list growing longer with each year. Sometimes they kept their monologues silent to save each other's plausible deniability. She stopped coming shortly after her second engagement, finally putting her ghosts to rest. Kakashi never did.

They met only rarely after that and as the time went and Kakashi's squad grew on him, drawing him back from a half numb state of blind following any orders he received, two things happened. First was Teri confronting him about what happened at the Root. The second… Her plea for standard mental health protocol was denied by the Council. That was when she had took up a job within MAD.

To think of it, a chūnin working at Mission Assignment Desk had access to Konoha shinobi roster and it gave her a perfect opportunity to personally evaluate village manpower without being suspicious. All comings and goings went through that damned office, except ANBU and Root. And today Kakashi had found out Teri also taught at the Academy for quite some time. Could it be her mission? Or her mission?

She'd been working for Yamanaka Inoichi for more than twenty years… If he had been behind their meeting back then, he probably saved Kakashi's life that day. That meant debt. It also meant someone in Konoha was keeping watch over the mental state of its shinobi, active and future ones, even if it wasn't approved by the Council.

And what a shame it was to know that Third’s Konoha was too proud to accept help it had been offered and needed so much.

Kakashi forced his lungs to work again, not sure if the relief he was currently feeling wasn't misplaced. Teri was keeping watch, but how much could she do alone? He voiced his concern, hiding the slight tremor in his fingers by tapping them on his thigh to the rhythm of a refrain of the old song his father had used to sing to him decades ago. It was a nervous habit he fought to give up for years after Hatake Sakumo’s death and yet it returned as soon as Teri’s presence reminded him of his past. It took him a conscious effort to stay otherwise still. He ached for movement, for action - anything to take his mind off the growing feeling of dread in his stomach.

“Kakashi…” The woman in front of him blinked so slowly the outsider could think she had decided to take a nap. It was a great tactics for keeping killing intent down that Kakashi had copied from her
years ago. When she opened her eyes again, they were grey. Calm.

“Just do your thing,” she said, idly twirling one of her rings around the tip of the thumb. He dared say, she looked wistful. “You have three kids to take care of now. Have it while you can… You don’t need me to tell you to proceed with caution. There are eyes and ears everywhere.”

The snow storm was descending on Konoha just outside his door. The wind raged on, rattling the shutters on the living room window and howling in the ventilation system like a wounded animal. Shinobi of Fire Country despised this part of the winter because it hid the sounds behind the crunch of fresh snow and made every footprint way too pronounced. Teri couldn’t choose a better time for this discussion. Was it all planned too?

“Don’t do anything rash. I and Awayuki will be on lookout so you’re not running into trouble blind,” she promised and the temptation to slam his head into the wall a couple of times became almost unbearable.

For all the cheek Rae Awayuki had, she (or he, Kakashi like most of Konoha wasn't entirely sure and Enka's cryptic byakugan-y smile betrayed nothing) had been entirely content with observing and collecting intel. And who could do it better than Cryptology Department member? Rae could get their hands basically on any missive or report! Only...

“But why Team Seven? Why this mission? Teri, that’s not a first D-rank material even by my standards!”

“It was the only option at hand we could legitimately use to assess Sasuke’s mental stability. Also, you were personally chosen by the place’s previous owner. Don’t worry, I was there every second of it.”

Kakashi scoffed at her. “You might be good, but my pack would know if anyone was on the premises.” It earned him a look that implied he was at least an imbecile. If he was generous to himself.

“Seriously, Kakashi? You know as well as I do, there are ways around it. I gave you many clues over the years. People joke about it all the time. Think.”

If there was something any normal shinobi knew not to do was not to play mind games with him. It never ended well. Thoroughly incensed, he gave her a onceover.

The woman in front of him was an exemplary deck chūnin - standard uniform, no weapons besides a small pouch with kunai and a Konoha hitaiate on her left thigh. Her hair was a little more ruffled than usual and… Wait, were there bloodstains on her green jacket? Kakashi sniffed through the mask and yes, it was blood. There was even more of it, washed out already, the smell mixing with heavy, tangy scent of freshly cut grass and paper dust. The stains didn’t look like they belonged to an enemy though and fairly resembled leftovers of nosebleed.

A technique taxing to such point? Teri was no jōnin but she had quite decent reserves so whatever she had used had to be demanding in terms of chakra. It also was long range if she told him the truth.

Something bothered Kakashi in this whole mess - like he was already given an answer but it was too obvious to be real. Then it struck him.

“Shadows?” he asked, not in the slightest hiding the incredulity. He thought it was just the result of his meeting with the Kyūbi, those blurry movement in his peripheral vision, but if it wasn’t… People joked of course. “You do have that Nara blood then.”
She reached out and patted him lightly on the chest, “You've always been a smart one so I hoped
you’d get to it by now. Well, seems like even a famed genius has his dense moments.”

Oh, things were going to turn sarcastic? Kakashi wasn’t sure he was in the mood for a battle of wits
and no, Teri wasn’t too. She just threw her head back to look at the lamp above them and sighed. In
its cold electric light her hair acquired bluish tint, especially the discolored strands. There were
crow’s feet in the corners of her eyes and mouth and some unwashed blood on her throat. She must
have come to him straight from T&I.

“What I’m about to say is strictly between you and I, Kakashi. A show of trust, if you will, my part
of a deal if you won’t. My grandfather was a Nara, but he didn't really care for his family. Disowned
my mom when she had been sixteen or so. He had offered me a reinstatement after we met, but I was
proud, thought we have time… I’ve told you back then, at the Memorial, he died during the
rampage. I thought about approaching the clan, I really did, but you know who my father is. I didn't
want more problems, neither for them, nor for me. It's a miracle I wasn't thrown out of the service
when he defected as it was. So only Inoichi-taichō knows and now - you.”

Kakashi looked at her suspiciously. Deal? Trust? It didn’t smell good at all.

Their eyes met and he saw a dark resolve there. This was bigger than him and her and their not
exactly friendship/his past dependence. She gave him a sharp smile and continued in a mocking
voice.

“Sins of a father… How fitting, you, me and our daddy issues. Have you ever heard of Nanagusa
Wada, Kakashi?” She didn’t wait for his reply, just rubbed her temples tiredly, like she was fighting
a bad case of migraine. “He was a good shinobi of Konoha until he wasn’t. Fatal disagreements with
a commanding officer, you see. He made his choice and instead of standing up for the cause he ran
away like a cowardly bitch and even knocked up some lady in the process, yeah. For all I know he's
chilling somewhere in the south with his new family, the bastard. These kids won’t inherit the damn
curse at least.”

What it all had to do with him, Kakashi had no idea. There was something in Teri’s voice that made
him believe it wasn’t just a rant, she was giving him hints that he only needed to untangle in this
whole mess. She lifted her hands, as if showing him something. He studied her shaking fingers with
barely visible indents as if she had been holding Rat seal for too long, a slightly wider than needed
thin golden band on her right ring finger, silver twig shaped one on her left thumb and two more
silvers - one resembling a crown of thorns and another looking like a blade of grass on the left ring
finger. When he looked up, sure that he will remember it in every detail, she beckoned him closer
and, after he complied, murmured so quietly even he could barely hear her, “But even the Nara
blood cannot change one fact, I'm still my father's daughter, Kakashi. I just had enough courage to
stay and fulfill my duty of protecting this village led by warmongering idiots.”

*Seems like I'm not the only one nursing my treachery.*

The gleam of understanding must have flashed in his eye because she nodded in satisfaction, “You
and I both serve this village, aren't we? Even if sometimes it means we have to choose people over
power.”

They stilled, silently watching each other. There was a promise between them, a knowledge that
could make them or break them for good.

“But it isn’t about me or you,” he not quite asked when the moment ended as abruptly as it begun.
The world shifted and the clock on the wall was ticking away again. “My team. Sasuke?”
“Council did him a fat lot of good with mandatory sessions,” Teri harrumphed sarcastically. “Do you know who those doctors were?”

“Same bastards that did my psych evaluation. Why didn't you come in, Teri? You helped me…” Knowing how convicted she was to her cause, it had to be a very valid reason for her to stay away in all honesty.

“I have no official medical training, Kakashi, and the boy was guarded so heavily, they'd know in less than a day. My Academy visits were the only opportunity I had.”

Another piece of the puzzle for Kakashi to pick apart.

“There are other… cases?” Not that he didn't have suspicions, but-

“Do I have to explain what Hyūga do to their own clansmen?”

That wasn’t really necessary - Enka was quite an eye opening experience for Team Hound.

Kakashi looked away and his gaze fell onto the snow stricken window pane. Drifting into the night Konoha was at mercy of the snowstorm. Heavy snowflakes were dancing in the air, fluttering around the ring of lamppost light before disappearing into the darkness. That night - when Enka had almost been married off to her father’s cousin and tortured to near death by Hiashi when she said no - was akin to today. The blizzard was unrelenting, only instead of the street light there was a body of his dying teammate and Yanagi’s fireflies had swarmed onto it, melting, but giving their life force and chakra to Enka in a one-sided waltz.

It was the moment when in some convoluted way Kakashi had learned to see beauty in death - death of the Hyūga Elders that he imagined with unexpected vividness.

“I am… aware.”

“Then trust me when I say Inuzuka kid is almost the only one relatively untroubled in this winter graduation batch. Shouldn’t it raise questions? Well adjusted Inuzuka, gods know our village is fucked up.”

While Kakashi had a quite favorable outlook on Inuzuka Clan and their way of training their small ones, he was well aware it did not mean an easy childhood. Just… Pack always made things easier. But he wasn't a Team Eight sensei even though at some point he wondered why not him but Kurenai had been assigned to what could grow into a decent tracking team. Now, after nine very eventful days he knew better. And still.

“The medics knew Sasuke was a mess and they approved me of all people as his teacher. With my background.”

Teri clicked her tongue at him in exasperation. “My meetings with you were a much better kept secret than you think. People tend to look away from grief, especially the likes of our gorgeous almighty Council. I bet they just decided you sprung back from almost unresponsive to relatively adjusted on your own.”

“You mean they-”

“Have no idea you’ve been suicidal? Look me in the eyes when I tell you this, Hatake Kakashi, and for gods’ sake make the connection already,” she groaned, thumping the back of her head on the wall. “It was such a pain to fake your psych eval.”
They didn't know? So they've given me Sasuke because I got away with my mind intact, not to make him worse? What about Naruto? What about Sakura? Then Teri's final words registered and he point blank gaped at her, “You've been keeping them off me? Why?!”

“Black Grasses Almighty, give me strength,” she muttered, rolling her eyes. “We’ve been molding you into someone we can trust for years and you have never noticed? And taichō says I’m more transparent than water in Nakagawa! Did Gai-kun knock you out much lately?”

Kakashi wisely chose to ignore the insinuation and save what'd been left of his slowly shattering dignity. “Who are we, Teri?” he growled instead. She shook her head.

“You haven’t proven yourself yet. If anything, you’ve made things worse. Took the team and went off radars - the audacity!”

“How am I supposed to teach them anything if Naruto is under constant surveillance-” Kakashi tried to interrupt, but Teri hissed at him.

“White Grasses swallow me whole if I don’t know! But doing what you've done? Taichō had to pull some strings to find you, I’ve probably lost more blood than in last five years because chibi Yamanaka isn't happy about her friend's sudden disappearance at all and her concerns are valid. The girl has a tongue longer than a chameleon and that's usually twice its body! Can you imagine the amount of rumors we've had to renounce in the past week?”

The woman in front of him was positively seething and Kakashi found himself unconsciously averting his gaze. She wasn’t simply unnerving, she made his hackles rise and he made no move to defend himself. Not when her eyes were glowing with that dangerous electric blue.

Too many things were happening around him that he hadn’t even thought to take into account.

“We've mitigated the damage somewhat but you need a more believable cover for your team, Kakashi,” she almost pleaded. “Do some stupid D-ranks: paint fences, take your kids to a training trip, whatever, and tell your chibis to mingle with others. Hokage anticipates progress, not silence. Rumors - right ones - will do the job much better than official reports.”

There was reason in her words, of course. When wasn’t it? But Kakashi’s shock was slowly ebbing away, giving way to growing annoyance. For fuck’s sake, he was twenty six, a jōnin, ex-ANBU commander and war veteran! No way in hell he had been manipulated his whole life! And for what cause?

“Just how long have you been planning all this, Teri?!” As commanding his words were, there was no chance to hide his wounded pride. She winced, unable to suppress a guilty downturn to her lips.

“Not me. Not in the beginning anyway. Yamanaka Inori-sama had picked my team when we barely graduated, Kakashi. I, Akimichi Tanbō, Tōga Maru and our then sensei Masayume Hiko-”

“Anko’s mother?” Kakashi interrupted, annoyance giving way to surprise for a split second.

“The one and only,” the chūnin nodded wistfully. “She deserved better, you know... Anyway. Inorisama got us into the system way before I even hit ten. Tanbō-kun's the second in command of Aviary and you probably had never heard of Maru... That boy was a promising infiltration agent until he got me half my grey hair by going off charts and almost slaughtering his whole team. Till this day I don’t know who was responsible, though my dibs are on the damned Jishin Dōmei, White Grasses swallow them whole!” she sneered, unconsciously fiddling with her rings. “To hell with it, what’s dead stays dead. When Inoichi-taichō took over the Analysis Team, I was explicitly advised
to aid him in his endeavors. He is a good commander regardless of what civilian part of the Council prefers to think. He also thinks you can be a good sensei for your genin.”

When Kakashi growled, restless for her to get to the point, Teri just smiled. “Patience. I was ordered to keep tabs on you after the Kyūbi disaster, only then. Uzumaki-sama was able to handle you quite well before that from what I’ve heard. I’d tell you what - someone really cares about young Uzumaki. Both of them, or they would never happen on the same team. Not with Uchiha of all people. Not with you, Sharingan-no Kakashi. Not after the rampage.”

This discussion was going to be the end of him. His attempts of understanding the situation were futile and crumbled like a house of cards with every next revelation Teri flung at him. Kakashi gave up all pretenses of being the one in control and slid down the wall. It was just too much. First the estate, then Sarutobi meddling and the Fox staring into his soul. Enough was enough, but had life ever respected his silent pleas? He tugged his mask down, hoping the stale air of his apartment would enter his lungs easier now.

“What are you doing to me? Why, he wanted to ask, but what’s the point… his lips moved and before he knew, the words were out of his mouth. “How do you know all this?”

Teri sat on the floor in front of him and hugged her knees to her chest. She’s always hated seiza, Kakashi thought absently, watching her pick at the dried blood her under nails. She took her time composing the answer.

“I was let on the secret by a concerned party. My confidante - she is very opinionated about the way the whole mess has been dealt with.”

“So now you're messing with me, Teri? It all sounds like a plot out of Jiraiya's novel!”

“Oh gods, Kakashi…” she choked on a slightly hysterical laugh, “Jiraiya might be biased where his literary attempts are concerned but he’s not so stupid to lay everything in the open, don't be a child. I'm just trying to give you some hints here. You have that smart head of yours, you can work it out.”

“Your hints paint a conspiracy the size of Konoha,” he murmured as he scratched at two-day stubble on his left cheek. It seemed like Sakura’s nervous habits were rubbing not only on Naruto.

“Have you always had this flair for melodrama? I never pegged you as a drama queen, Kakashi,” the woman chuckled.

“I never pegged you as a liar this good.”

“As my Nara grandfather used to say ‘strive to exceed any expectation in the time of need by being mediocre on a daily basis’. Learn while I’m alive.”

“Fuck it all, Teri! Quit your games! I just want to understand,” he groaned helplessly.

“I’m sorry, boy, get in the line.” And here she was again, making him feel way too young and fragile for his age and rank. “You won’t even make it to the first hundred of poor souls desperately trying to decode the intricacies of political intrigue of shinobi capital of Fire Country, believe me,” she sarcastically did fingerquotes in the air. “I might have some leads, I might know some secrets but Nanagusa Teri doesn't kiss and tell. Doesn’t even really kiss. I’m awful at that whole seduction thing, you know.”

They stared at each other for a minute. Tension was rolling off Kakashi in waves and dissolving in the sea of serenity the woman in front of him emitted. That was a masterful work on the killing intent on her part, but he was in no state to appreciate the show. Finally she must have found something in
his hawkish stare and angrily twitching upper lip and told him, no, ordered gravely, “Unmess the mess you’ve made with your genin and then we talk again. You have until the middle of March to prepare them for a C-rank. Beginning of April if we're lucky.”

His heart missed a beat. “Teri, I can't possibly! They’re too young!” But she didn't relent.

“You can and you will, Kakashi. New war is coming and some of our operatives in other villages went off the maps. We need you to be ready.”

“They are kids!”

“And if we do everything right, they will stay kids for a little longer. Kakashi, listen to me.”

She opened her palms in peace offering, but he snarled and pushed away from the wall, looming over her menacingly. “I won't be a pawn in your goddamn games!”

She measured him with an exhausted stare, at once looking all her thirty four years old. “Our peace time is running out, you know it, don't you? Dōjin and his people are good at their job, but Jishin Dōmei has already claimed a quarter of the Land of Rice Fields. It's three goddamn shinobi village against one, Kakashi, and if you believe these upcoming peace talks have any chance of success, you are a fool!”

The overwhelming smell of danger felt like a knife in Kakashi's nose, not protected by the mask. He knew the game Teri was playing with him was over. She was deadly serious and he had no reason not to believe her, not when her voice shook with barely contained rage.

“I may only be a MAD chūnin and and Academy teacher, but I've seen it so many times - young children taking a mission for the sake of this village only to be returned as a charred remains or a name on the stone. How long does this war last, Kakashi? Twenty years! How many have we lost to it and how many will die?”

“Jishin Dōmei... Earthquake Alliance is going to fall apart any day now,” he repeated the rumor, already knowing it was false. Good for village morale and therefore more likely planted by the likes of Teri than anywhere close to reality. She confirmed his suspicions by waving his words off.

“Iwa has an iron grip on Ishi, and Suna holds a grudge against Konoha, the one the size of Wind Country's crumbling economy. Whatever their internal spats are…”

“A common foe unites better than any treaties,” Kakashi nodded in understanding. “But it's been a while since the last open confrontation. Even Kumo gives us more trouble these days. Life goes on.”

Teri reached out and pulled at his mask pooling loosely under his chin until they were eye to eye.

“For some of us… You see, I’ve always been too busy and way too afraid of being a parent. Of bringing a new life into this caught up in the never-ending war world, where so many orphaned and forever changed children are fighting for their lives already. My husband works for Diplomatic Corps that are negotiating for peace, they battle with words while I can't even do this much. People like me or Iruka-kun, or Anko-chan for that matter - children of traitors and orphans of the war - are forever branded in the eyes of the powers that be. We seek our own ways to make the change and still… Ceasefire won't hold for long.”

She sucked in a ragged breath as her hand slid onto Kakashi's neck, bringing their foreheads together in a deceptively intimate gesture.

“Tsuchikage won't listen to anything Dōjin and other ambassadors say because the old faggot has
reasons, legitimate reasons this time and he wants war. He wants Konoha blood. He wants us gone, our village razed into the ground, and when he comes for us... Hokage won't ask for your opinion, Kakashi. Neither will Danzō.”

He jerked back at the sound of the Elder's name, mortified and furious, but Teri stopped him before the words were out of his mouth.

“Don't. We both know, they will order and you will lead your team into this old war like lambs for slaughter. Think about it and for the sake of all you hold dear, please, make sure your kids know more than how to run. Teach them how to survive.”

The woman looked into his narrowed eye one last time and let herself out of his personal space and his apartment without a goodbye, leaving Kakashi to fume in silence. He hated her in this moment at a completely new level even for him because no matter how much he didn't want to listen and hear what Teri tried to say, he knew she was right. And he hated it too.

With a groan he pushed himself upright and took a step forward, pressing his forehead against the wall where Teri had been just a minute ago. The air still held her smell - freshly cut grass and dusty books - unchanged by years and whatever she had been playing at under the noses of the Konoha's powers that be. Could he trust her? It wasn't just his life at stake anymore…

Another deep breath filled his lungs. And another. Kakashi staggered back to his couch, fell into it in one boneless heap, propping his feet on one of the armrests, and stared vacantly into the muddy sky shedding wet snow onto the village. It would melt in the morning as if it had never been here. This too shall pass. Kakashi would think and plan and make decisions that have potential to reshape the world. Tomorrow.

Only when he was already slipping under his shuriken patterned covers and into a fitful slumber, he remembered - Teri hadn’t said a word about the findings from the Takara estate. It seemed his visit to Asuma had to wait now.

His fingers kept unconsciously moving in the air, twitching in a familiar rhythm as the song from his childhood, the one that was older than his father, the father of his father even, haunted him into sleep.

*This burden of mine won't bring me down, however heavy it shall become...*  
...*With my whole soul I begin to believe in the necessity of the evil.*

“Gai-sensei, is it even humanly possible?” covered in mud and dried sweat girl exclaims incredulously at the man in front of her. “No one can scale Hokage Mountain that fast without chakra!”

“Oh my dear Tenten! One day I will introduce you three to my Rival so you can see for yourselves how hip and cool he is!” Gai wipes a manly tear that escapes him at the prospect of Team Gai and Team Seven training together and reaching new marvelous heights… It will be so inspiring and youthful! Isn't it so incredible that Kakashi has finally came out from that shell he used to carry like one more mask? Ah, it is indeed.

“Gai-sensei, Gai-sensei!”

The man turns to one of his beloved students only to find him already bouncing eagerly on his
tiptoes. Lee is so bright and full of energy! Gai is truly a lucky man to have such a youthful team!

“Yes, Lee?!” he bellows and last year leaves on the azalea bush they camp under shower on them.

Tenten and Neji groan in unison and begin picking the scraps off the grime they are covered in since team's last run in with the landslide, but Lee is undeterred by such a tiny inconvenience. His eyes are sparkling with enthusiasm as he dances around their small fire pit and promises to scale the monument in thirty, no, twenty six minutes!

Gai cheers him on and joins the future test of stamina and agility, of course, and even Tenten and Neji stop preening their feathers to agree to be referees for Lee's new feat even thought they exasperatedly decline the challenge itself. Gai is so proud of them! it is always a joy to see team spirit on the rise!

He firmly believes it is one of absolutely paramount features of a successful mission. Maybe that's how he will start his first attempt at challenging Kakashi to a Team Gai vs. Team Seven obstacle course run. Knowing his hip and cool Rival, he won't agree on the first try, but after all these years Gai is hardly discouraged by the aloof appearance and initial rejection.

Being friends with Kakashi is not an easy thing to do, yet Gai cherishes this relationship greatly. He remembers the way his Rival drunkenly confided in him at the party last week that he would hardly survive till now if not for his pack being there and pack, as Yanagi-san timely (if silently) explained, is a very broad term in Kakashi's vocabulary. Gai doesn't need grand words to know his efforts hasn't gone in vain, but hearing it was quite delightful nevertheless.

Neji shakes last of the muck off his clothes and stiffly begs to get back on the road. It seems mostly related to Lee's abundant attempts at training for his challenge by scaling closest trees than to both Neji and Tenten getting required rest, but Gai concedes. Trials of mind shall be overcome as patiently as trials of body. His beloved students still need that lesson to be learnt and running in spite of exhaustion for a couple of hours till the closest blockpost will serve as a good reminder.

Back on the road Gai returns to his previous train of thought and looks forward to the team competition with a gleaming smile.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Less than two weeks since the last update, can you believe it? I blame your amazing reviews for giving me so much inspiration :D Ok, blame is a wrong word because I'm so damn grateful to everyone who follows this story and comments <3 You guys are so amazing and I love every one of you!
A/N2: This chapter concludes Takara Estate arc and we are moving on to the greener (or snowier) pastures! New missions! Training! Meeting other genin and more! Ohh, I'm off to write :D
Much love, Kay <3
you tell a beautiful lie (it's going to drive you crazy)

Chapter Summary

In the blink of an eye everything you ever knew can change.

Chapter Notes

The song for this chapter is Beautiful Lie by Yoav

See the end of the chapter for more notes

January 19th, year 2019 since the birth of the Sage of Six Paths

Sakura was dreaming of dogs.

It wasn't exactly new since her life had been invaded by ninken for more than a week now, but this one, in particular, was strange. It felt as if she dreamt of dreaming, even with eyes closed knowing she was in her bed, Guruko curled at her feet and Pakkun snoring on her pillow. Just another ordinary night.

But why was it so hard to breathe?

Awareness crashed on her in sync with the first wave of dizziness and Sakura jerked upright to get the heaviness off her chest. Her body didn't obey.

Inner! she projected in panic and a hot wave of whatshithangon overcame her. Inner sank into Sakura's veins like fire, bringing crystal clarity to their shared mindscape.


Sakura finally managed to pry her eyes open and searched the room wildly. It was barely a crack of dawn, first light smothered by still raging outside snowstorm and in the greyscale dimness, there was something huge and black pressing onto her and… dripping slobber on her face.

"Bull, get off!" she squeaked at the happily sniffing at her dog. "Come on, Bull, I can't breathe!"

He obediently jumped off her and soundlessly landed on the wooden floor. Sakura finally managed a deep inhale that filled her lungs with the fresh air and threw a pen at the light switch near the door, her mind reflexively doing necessary math and physics for it to hit yet not to break the plastic.

"You tell me, how can this big boy look so guilty?" Inner crooned, then barked at still trying to snap out of her dream-like state companion. "You upset him, long face! Shame on you!~

Are you offering me to call him a good boy to make it better? the girl inquired snidely as she wiped dog saliva off her face with yesterday t-shirt. She had dropped her dusty clothes by the bed before falling asleep, too tired for anything but a quick shower and even quicker talk to mom and now it definitely had only one place to go - laundry basket.
"What's all the ruckus?" Pakkun grumbled from his favorite spot, interrupting the beginning of a heated debate. "Bull?"

The bulldog smiled at his pack member with all who-know-how-many teeth he had and bumped his box-like head into Sakura's hip.

"Not a sweet-talker, are you?" she asked philosophically, by now aware that the biggest ninkei in her sensei's pack preferred to play 'I'm just a dog, human speech is a mystery to me' card on a daily basis. Another long stripe of saliva mysteriously appeared on her bare thigh while she yawned and Sakura giggled in spite of herself. "I missed you too, Bull!" She hugged him lightly and flopped back on her bed, letting exited Guruko climb on her lap.

The dogs held a silent conversation in low growls and barks so she had no idea what they were talking about, but then Pakkun's ears perked up. He threw a sideways glance at the clock and then at Sakura, his tiny nose pinched hesitantly. Guruko huffed and tried to burrow himself in her nightshirt. This was in no way their usual behavior.

"Now, come on, you wouldn't wake me up at five if you wanted to keep it from me." She nudged Bull's paw with her foot, "What's happening?"

"Paradigm shift is happening, Pinkie," Pakkun grumbled. "Kakashi wants you to be at the meeting point in twenty."

"Oh- okay?" Her body moved before she knew it and seven minutes later she was already tying a weapons pouch to her thigh, studying two long sleeve qipao dresses - one customary crimson, one pitch-black - lying on top of her bed. "Which one?"

Pakkun gave her a stinky eye that clearly implied he had thought her better than that.

"Sasuke's fangirl-" she pointed at the red one with an eye-roll, "or I mean business?"

Guruko produced a sound that could as well be choking laughter, Bull showed his canines in a semblance of a smile, but the pug just sighed, "Business. Don’t you need something warmer than that?"

Sakura shrugged as she pulled the black dress over her head, "I can regulate my body temperature by adjusting the flow of chakra, Iruka-sensei’s taught us how to."

“Did he.” The sheer amount of skepticism was almost palpable.

A memory of her cursing classmates, so timely provided by Inner, made Sakura cringe and she amended, "He explained the basics and I haven’t been a top kunoichi of the year for nothing, Pakkun-san. Anyway, what about the boys?"

“Ūhei and Bisuke will handle ‘em,” Guruko supplied helpfully. “Alpha said they’re not needed at where you’re going, not yet.”

She opened her mouth to ask where this where was and what was even happening, but the pug had already taken his place on top of Bull's head and nodded at the clock. "Kakashi needs your brains, girl. You can feel proud on the way to the meeting point. Now move."

“Pakkun is always a grump when he’s not getting his beauty sleep, Sa-chan. Don't take it personally,” Guruko quipped jovially as only a young puppy could and bounded out of the window. She playfully saluted him and followed suit into the early morning.
As soon as they hit the closest road, Guruko took a sharp turn left, leading Sakura westbound. That way lay Laurel District and clan lands of Hazawa and Inuzuka, but she supposed it could hardly be their destination. They passed Nidai Kōen and her assumption proved right: instead of entering Laurel, the heart of Konoha diplomacy, Guruko changed direction again and they sprinted north along the Old Canal, leaving haughty estates of diplomats and then Darkwood District behind them. There, at the crossroads, Sakura saw a familiar figure slumped against the gates of the park that separated never sleeping Flower District from inhabited by shinobi Shadow.

She came to a halt by his side, a little out of breath, but nowhere as winded as such run would probably make her just two weeks ago. A tingling sensation on her skin told Sakura she had entered a genjutsu and Inner moved closer to the surface. Just in case.

“Reporting for duty,” she murmured the words that came to her easily and was rewarded by an approving nod of her sensei.

He was dressed in his customary navy blues and green flack jacket, completely ignorant to the thick layer of snow coating his shoulders, mask and hitaiate hiding most of his face. The only thing that seemed ridiculously out of place was a plastic bag with what under the uneven streetlight looked like a trashy romance book.

_Ew, that’s not cool, Inner grimaced in disgust. I get the porn, but this is just gross~_

_Shit up, pervert_, Sakura countered and asked out loud, “Pakkun-san said you need my brains, sensei?”

He gave her outfit a once-over, no doubt noticing her less than appropriate for current weather clothing and the lack of cold bites, and smiled as no person at barely twenty past five should, “We’re paying a visit to a couple of friends, Sakura-chan.” Then something dark distorted his features - not a killing intent - by now Sakura firmly believed that her teacher had a flawless control on it - but the next best thing: Hatake Kakashi in a mission mode.

She bit the inside of her cheek as all her questions evaporated under his heavy stare and nodded, “Acknowledged.”

“**You are to watch and listen closely.**”

“**Acknowledged.**”

“**As soon as we enter the apartment you are not to say a single word unless I give you my permission.**”

“Ac-”

“Kakashi…” Akino was hard to mistake for any other ninken even though his voice was thick with accusation. “Don’t give the pup a heart attack, will ya?” A wet nose brushed Sakura’s palm, pulling her out of a trance-like state. “Don’t forget to breathe, Pinkie, Ūhei is on Naruto-sitting duty today.”

Her fingers slid into akita’s fur, but Sakura continued to stare mutely at the man in front of her. One phrase was all it took for him to look like all strength was suddenly drained from his body the way air escaped a deflating balloon. He covered his face with a trembling hand, pressed tightly on his temples and exhaled slowly as if counting to ten.

“Sensei?” she whispered softly, unsure of herself. Of course, she knew that his life hadn’t been a
walk in the park, but this…

“I’m sorry, Sakura-chan. Sometimes it’s hard to remember.” He shook himself off like his summons did. "It’s just been a long night."

A warm, heavy hand settled on top of her head and he smiled at her as if this moment never happened. She returned the smile reluctantly, letting the knowledge that it did happen sink in. She could feel her priorities shift and Inner grow a little thinner, twining them a little tighter—

This village needs a fucking change~

Was it her? Was it Inner? It didn’t matter anymore. Mastering a Great Seal was a good goal but... it was just a tool. Maybe Sakura was foolish and arrogant, but Kakashi-sensei wasn’t just her teacher, he was her teammate and she, weak and practically helpless now, would advance and go all out for her teammates.

That would be her nindō.

Teri stapled her fingers together in a gesture that felt stolen even after almost two decades of use and squinted. The girl was… fascinating for a lack of a better word. A scientist in her wanted to try out girl’s defenses and see for herself how the mind operated under Niki Isshin, but she was long past acting on such urges. It was what once had driven her grandfather past any reason and, therefore, deemed untrustworthy in her books. Thank the Grasses she had Dōjin to keep her sane and steady.

But even without touching Sakura-san's mind she could feel the change (of course only because she knew where to look, that’s why Inoichi-taichō had trained her). It came in waves, taking awareness out of the girl’s eyes and brightening the green when unfocused sharpness ebbed away. Somehow Teri had a sneaking suspicion that such fluid substitution was not normal for the jutsu. Niki Isshin was deep undercover stuff that had to be uncoiled carefully and normally stopped both personalities from manifesting at once, which definitely wasn't the case here. But if it worked and worked good enough for Kakashi to exploit it…

The dynamics between the two was even more intriguing.

The girl seemed to read him like a book. She reacted to the slightest twitches, stopping her explanations at the move of his pinky finger and getting back on track when he blinked at her. For all stress last months had caused her, Teri could see the progress Kakashi had made in turning a rough geode into an unpolished gem. Given enough time…

She had had her reservations about giving him this team. Advocated against it even, fearing for his mental state after those almost failed missions in annexed by Lightning territory. Now, when she had witnessed Sakura-san's devotion to the man by all accounts unfit for raising children, she was sure, Tsunade-sama put her money on the right one. For once it felt good to be in the wrong.

However sweet it tasted to know that a lost boy she and Inoichi-taichō had stopped from killing himself twelve years ago managed to turn into a responsible man, Teri couldn't bask in the light of this collective achievement for long. Unfortunately, they had a situation at hand with no foreseeable solution and it included Hokage's immediate family. Yesterday it slipped her mind, the need to warn Kakashi overshadowing the whole monkey whistle affair, but he was right in coming to her and bringing the girl with him. Even if putting the whole shebang in the report was out of the question, knowing who and how had managed to break into the estate and the sanctuary was a matter of vital importance.
She burrowed deeper into Dōjin's fluffy, embroidered with peaches bathrobe - the first thing she had fished out of the closet when her doorbell rang - and chewed on her lip thoughtfully. Sakura-san was right, pieces of fabric Kakashi had brought unmistakably belonged to the Soul of the Night. That kimono, unlike many possessions of Sarutobi Biwako, had not been inherited by one of her three daughters, neither it was held at the display at Konoha Museum. The thing was a work of art costing millions of ryo…

Frowning, Teri mindlessly began braiding her hair as she stared at the picture hanging on the wall behind the couch Kakashi had chosen as his perch.

Her family was smiling at her from the photo. Well, most of them, but her eyes stopped on her grandmother - a tall woman with hair tinted violet and a tape measure in her hands. Ōbane Shime was still keeping her teaching post in the Academy even despite her advanced age. She had never been a fighter, not with great-grandma’s refusal to actually let her graduate, but Shime-baa had used to be a seamstress for Senju and, later, Oya clan, in fact, long enough to acquire rare knowledge that Nidaime had ordered her to impart on future kunoichi of Konoha. She also had been the one to teach Teri almost everything she knew about the dress. Her advice would be invaluable now, but somehow traveling to the Tea District at quarter to six in the morning didn't seem alluring enough to get out of the cozy old recliner. Teri transferred her gaze to the girl that was silently studying the living room as she sipped her now lukewarm tea.

"Sakura-san, what do you know about the Soul of the Night except for what we have discussed in class?" she asked. The girl was a friend with Yamanaka heiress who usually was an endless source of information. It was worth a shot.

A wordless exchange that followed made Teri conceal her smile behind a yawn. Even the mask couldn't hide the way Kakashi's face softened when the young kunoichi began another report after she got his permission. Girl's eyes were gleaming as she spoke because Teri would bet her week's pay, she'd seen it too.

"Not much is known about it, but Ino once said that heirlooms like this kimono are passed down the line, especially in old clans. Usually, it means the eldest daughter, but Sarutobi are strictly patriarchal-
"

"Hokage's eldest son, Ryūen, has been bedridden after the run-in with Ishi nin in 2011 and his wife died in childbirth," Kakashi chimed in. His voice was tinged with regret. "Sana-san was an exemplary shinobi."

"I remember her too. Yoshino’s assault squad if I am not mistaken.” Teri frowned, trying to grasp an elusive thought. “In childbirth… A boy? Kono-something, Academy second grade?"

Kakashi shrugged, though he too seemed unsure.

Teri wasn't really acquainted with the kid. While Iruka-kun had a real talent with children and it created a certain leeway for him, letting his Academy career skyrocket in spite of his heritage, she was a passable substitute teacher but nothing more. Children of nukenin, regardless of their age and track record, weren't exactly the best company for Hokage's grandson so Teri wouldn't probably even recognize the boy in the crowd.

Sakura took that information but seemed skeptical of what to do with it just as the adult shinobi in the room. She idly traced feathery ornament on her empty teacup, "Why would this Kono give the family heirloom away though? And who would even think of taking it to a break-in?"

Her eyes then darkened, fingers going white as she gripped the cup. Teri had half a mind to reach out
and take her great-grandmother's porcelain away before the girl broke it and cut herself, but she stopped when their gazes met. There was something wild in her, brutal, almost feral as she smiled toothily, "He didn't give it away. Kakashi-sensei, we need Naruto!"

"Sakura, what do you-" Kakashi's brow quirked, but she shook her head, interrupting him.

"Sensei, I have an idea, but we really need Naruto because he knows. And Sasuke too, he's probably even met him."

Teri had a sneaking suspicion the girl would browbeat Kakashi into an agreement in a span of mere minutes, she seemed like the type. With a sigh, Teri patted the floor with her bare feet until she found her bunny slippers, then got out of her recliner to the accompaniment of popping joints and shuffled towards the kitchen to put the kettle on. It was going to be a long morning…

She was humming one of her favorite songs while starting breakfast when two new chakra signatures behind her back signaled the arrival and departure of Kakashi's ninken. "No blood on the carpet!" she shouted belatedly.

"There was none," he assured her, coming to stand by her side at the counter, "I've thought about what you've told me yesterday."

She finished chopping pickled daikon, dumped it on tsukemono platter and nodded, motioning for him to go on.

"You were right, hiding them can only make it worse. I just..." Kakashi glanced at the girl who was studying book titles of Teri's romance novels mixed with Dōjin's collection of foreign bingo books and shinobi biographies. Assured she was occupied, he tugged his mask down so it only covered his chin and stuffed a piece of daikon in his mouth. "I thought they've given me this team to-"

"Fuck them up? I should've figured." The rhythmic clicking of the knife on the cutting board paused as she regarded him for a moment. "I'm not privy to Hokage's mind, less so to Councilor's, but I doubt it. Twenty years without a peace treaty, one armistice broken after another… The village needs fighters, Kakashi, and you are one of the best we have. It was hard to put Sakura-san on your team simply because she showed no promise for combat and a great deal of mental capabilities. If not for Ino-Shika-Chō formation being a must, she'd be teamed up with Nara and Hyūga heirs."

He chuckled, "Poor Nara doesn't know the bullet he escaped. And Hyūga? I've heard the girl can't hurt a fly after having her first kill before she was five. That team would be a walking target."

"They'd never leave the village, just like me," Teri murmured. "Inoichi-taichō'd have a blast with their minds."

"How did you get the Hokage to approve this Team Seven then?"

"Not me. Taichō did all the talking. Start the rice cooker please."

He did, careful to stay facing away from the living room. "I still don't get it."

"Sasuke was yours from the beginning, sharingan and all. Naruto was trickier, but parentage card was enough to convince the Hokage - he had a soft spot for Namikaze-sama after all. Also, cue your previous experience with Kyūbi - that won the Council over. As for Sakura-san…" Teri put a lid on the frying pan and reached into the cupboard for two more teacups. The smile playing on her lips was snarky enough for him to not so subtly back away a bit. "You have one of the best track records when it comes to working with traumatized kunoichi, Kakashi. I've heard certain personal files had to be unsealed, but ANBU Commanders and Jōnin Commander were more than happy to provide."
You were getting a girl either way and to keep a semblance of a balance in this graduation batch Sakura-san could either be placed with you or Shiranui-san—"

"Say no more!" Kakashi coughed, equally terrified and enthralled by the very idea of Sakura working with Genma. That would be kingdom come early.

"A disaster, no matter how you spin it." Teri twirled a ladle between her fingers as if to prove her point. "A little advertising where it counts and the powers that be simply chose the safest option. I'm not a seer, but something tells me you have a carte blanche when it comes to all three. Whatever you do, as long as they progress and are going to be ready to at least take part in the next Exam, Administration would be as happy as a bunch of old morons with god complex can be."

He went silent for a while, digesting her words and pickles. Teri left him to it and pondered setting the table. The one in the kitchen was too small, fit for one, two at most since she had been living alone for nine months out of a year with Dōjin constantly being away on his diplomatic missions. There was no chance it would fit two adults and three almost teenagers, which left the coffee table in the living room as the only viable option.

She grabbed plates and a bunch of chopsticks, a pot with miso soup already balanced precariously in the crook of her elbow, but Kakashi's deadly serious voice stopped her in her tracks. "I'm not going to turn them into the weapons, Teri. But I'll do my fucking best to give them a headstart, so when their time comes they can change this world and stop this war if we can't."

Their eyes met when he already pulled his mask back up, but a piece of fabric did nothing to hide the vulnerability he projected. It had been way too easy to forget that despite his illustrious record Kakashi had been a child of war with all the consequences. In trying to look out for last of Uzushio blood Teri had let him out of her sight some time ago and it apparently had only given more food to his abandonment issues.

She had never met her cousins or blood brothers and her relationship with Kakashi didn't really fit those terms, but she felt responsible for him. Cared about him even, in her own twisted way.

"I trust your judgment, Kakashi. And I can see it, you're good for them."

He lit up like Summer Festival fireworks at her admission and she swallowed a sigh. There wasn't going to be any apologies or proclamations of sisterly love, of course, she had her own can of worms related to that particular word. She felt, however, like there would be a lot of patching up in the future. This boy, no, this man still needed someone to tell him he would be alright, now even more than before. That (as well as a nudge in the right direction) she could do just fine.

"You're not going to do it alone, dog boy. Now come on, help me with the dishes. I'll have no adolescents thrown into the pool of conspiracy theories over food in this house. First we eat."

A faint sound of crunching snow on the street below announced the arrival of two boys well before they knocked on her door. They still had so much to learn, to feel, to achieve...

If only these damn peace talks succeeded.

In days like this Shikamaru wondered what crime exactly had he committed in his past life to deserve being placed on Team Ten.

Sure thing, Chōji was a great friend and an alright teammate - they'd spent their whole childhood basically in the same metaphorical sandbox (in reality it was Nara Clanhouse engawa because no
force in the universe could make Shikamaru interact with sand, not when it managed to get everywhere and was generally gross) - but Ino… Alright, to be fair she too wasn't the worst that could happen to him both friend- and teammate-wise, but her games made him want to ask his ma for a shadow binding technique right now, to hell with the official rite of passage and other bullcrap. No sane person would be that gleeful at the prospect of torturing their poor jōnin-sensei.

"C'mon, Shika, get up! What's better than a good spar?!!"

No sane person would still believe Shikamaru could be motivated to train physically. Not when every sudden movement could render him useless.

(okay, maybe not every movement, but Shikamaru was a master of exaggeration both as a genius and a Nara, which meant he had it down to a fine art)

On the other hand, the cover - that wasn't even a cover anymore - of being a stubborn lazy asshole helped him to save that compromising fact from becoming public knowledge and Ino for all her perceptiveness wasn't a genius. Maybe he should have told her years ago instead of enduring her constant nagging in hopes she would finally get it without him humiliating himself by spelling it out.

An heir to Nara Clan can’t even do fifty push-ups without a nerve in his neck getting pinched - what a joke!

Years ago when they all just started the Academy Shikamaru hid it out of fear of being taunted like Chōji had been for his weight or Shino for his bad sight. He chose to keep to the back of the class, slumped in his chair in any position that wouldn't hurt, or spend the breaks laying on the grass and staring at the clouds. Captivated by their slow, aimless wander since before he even left the cradle, Shikamaru had never had any qualms about his life passing by uneventfully - just him and the clouds in the vast, impartial to his flaws sky.

He was about seven when the understanding that his damn lordosis was a weakness that could be potentially exploited by enemy finally sunk in. Since he knew the history of Konoha well enough, Shikamaru decided to keep his weak spot hidden from his classmates. Chances were, it was only a question of time before one of them had gone rogue like that man Tōga Iruka-sensei had told them about. What had once been a matter of trust and nagged at his still kicking conscience, became a matter of his future survival.

Now both Ino and Chōji were his teammates and, by all means, Shikamaru had to tell them. Once fence-painting and delivery missions gave way to anything remotely close to actual combat, his secret could kill them. He knew he was being selfish by lying by omission and Nara never put their teammates in danger. Not until it benefited the mission.

*I just didn't have an opportunity or there wasn't a good time* could probably work for hypothetical Kiba or Naruto, but Ino was Inoichi-san's daughter, she’d see through his sorry excuse and Chōji, frankly, deserved the truth just because he was lugging Shikamaru limp body around for ages and not even once complained about it.

Exaggeratedly loud footsteps boomed through the engawa, returning Shikamaru back to reality as they closed in on him with the inevitability of fuming Ino.

"You can't just sleep another day away because Asuma-sensei is as lazy as you!" she exclaimed. Damn, they were at exclamations already. What's got her so steamed up so early in the morning? Surely it wasn't his uncooperativeness, not after nine years of it.

"You are pathetic, Shika!"
"I am tormented by eternal confusion which origin I cannot recall..." he countered drowsily and tried to slither away from her incoming chokehold. To his regret, unsuccessfully.

It felt like someone took a bucket of molten iron and poured it onto his neck, right between the sixth and seventh vertebra. The air left his lungs and Shikamaru went slack, gritting his teeth, as he waited for colorful blur dancing before his eyes to subside. Ino, of course, interpreted it her way.

"Shika, don't you dare to play dead on me!"

"Alright," he groaned, carefully pushing her away, "If you want action that badly, let's go hunt Team Eight and you can beat Kiba into a plump."

The blonde menace sniggered in an absolutely unladylike way - how come people still believed her innocent facade, he had no idea - and punched the air. "That's more like it! Come on, it's time to whip some furry ass!"

"Ino, that was rude." The only Akimichi in vicinity shook his head chidingly, swallowed a handful of BBQ flavored potato chips and shrugged the crumbs off his clothes. "Shika, you need a hand?"

"Look at him, Choji, he needs a carriage."

"Screw you," Shikamaru muttered acidly but made no attempt to move. Something must've twisted out of alignment in his neck and he felt pulsating pain every time he as much as moved a finger of his left hand.

Going for Kiba was nothing but a good excuse to meet with Team Eight. Team Eight meant Hinata and Hinata with her all-seeing eyes and gentle hands meant temporary but sweet release from the throbbing pain. In all honesty, being teamed up with Hyūga heiress was much more preferable in his cards than Ino-Shika-Chō formation, not in the least because her byakugan made her the only person besides Shikamaru's parents and doctors to know about his… disadvantage. Hinata could basically see him inside and out, sparing him from putting his woes into words.

"Hold tight," Choji murmured, interrupting Shikamaru's wishful thinking as he hoisted him up and broke into running.

In contrast to Ino's brashness, the oldest son of Akimichi Clan Head was one of the most delicate human beings young Nara had ever met (after Hinata of course, but that was quite another story). Never the one to start a conflict and unquestionably loyal, he was a great friend and Shikamaru had a hard time stopping from guilttripping himself into a very dark place for his lies, especially when he was hanging off Choji's shoulders as they bounded after high as a kite Ino.

He definitely had to come clean and bear the consequences. What a shame he was a coward.

Hinata scooped a handful of snow from the ground and let it melt in her fingers. Real winter, as short as it lasted, was a rare sight in Konoha and blizzards were even more uncommon. The worst of it had stopped somewhere around 8 am, but sometimes wind shook snow-covered branches hard enough for already thawing wet mass to slide down on an unsuspecting passerby's head.

She closed her eyes, willing byakugan to activate, and hid a tiny smile in the high collar of her warm coat. One of such branches was just a couple meters away, right above sulking Kiba-kun. He had been the last to break Kurenai-sensei's genjutsu of the day and the woman didn't hesitate to criticize his chakra control before making him do more exercises while his teammates enjoyed their rest time.
Shino-kun's kikaichū landed on Hinata's wet fingers, warming them with little pulses of chakra. She whispered her thanks to a little beetle and turned to where its master was sitting under another Hashirama tree. His amazing chakra system never ceased to be a delight to her eyes. It was so bright and buzzing with life!

No one in her class could really compete with the way Naruto-kun shone - like the sun on clear midday - but Shino-kun was stars in the darkest moments before the dawn, an ever-changing constellation of his hive never hurting her eyes quite that much. Looking at Kiba-kun, on the other hand, always made her think of festival lantern on a string leading to a smaller one - Akamaru. As years went their unwavering connection only grew stronger, morphing into an unbreakable bond.

The puppy was sitting by his partner's side, whining supportively, but he too felt the change in the air at the same time Hinata's eyes caught a glimpse of incoming signatures.

A shooting star of a familiar wild chakra descended onto Kiba with an ear piercing yell. Hinata sighed, knowing what was to come, and patted the spot on the ground by her side welcomingly. Ino-san tended to behave like a vengeful spirit when she was unhappy about something and Kiba-kun was always up for an altercation if it meant no meditation. The best way to deal with it was to leave Ino-san and her target alone and wait out until they spent the excess energy in a spar.

A cloud of foggy chakra slid onto the wilting grass on Hinata's right, uncovering another signature akin to a trembling firefly. "Hello, Shikamaru-san, Chōji-san," she murmured politely and opened her eyes.

"Hinata-san," Chōji beamed at her, "How have you been lately?"

Her lips twitched nervously the moment she thought of her Father. The words got stuck in her throat, the heavy and familiar weight she could never get rid of. She shook her head without as much as a word to keep from stuttering and waved her hand in apology.

"Hope it gets better soon, 'nata-san," the boy said sincerely, already munching on something. "A cookie?"

She took a chocolate chip one from the box he offered with a grateful smile and nibbled on it as he ambled towards Shino-kun and struck a conversation with him. When everyone except for silently lying on the ground Shikamaru-san was out of reach, the sour-faced boy greeted her with a raspy "Hey."

Hinata swallowed an exasperated sigh and wordlessly reached out to touch his neck. Even without byakugan she could sense that something went awry. They’d known each other for six years plus some change, by now it was simple as breathing - to find pulled muscles, loosen them with a precise touch of chakra imbued finger and push the vertebra back into alignment. She did call up byakugan still, just to make sure there was no nerve damage. Her first wobbly attempts to help had happened well before she acquired necessary anatomy knowledge and till this day she was still amazed she had never made it worse with her meddling.

"You’re a lifesaver, Hinata," Shikamaru-san muttered as he slowly sat up when the first rush of blood to his head died down. “Medics would fight to have you if you only showed what you’re able to do. You could own it.”

She felt like choking on air again and turned away. “That- that is impossible. An heir cannot-”

“Yes,” she deferred simply. That was the essence of her rift with Father. He wanted her on the frontlines, sowing pain and death. That was the way of a true Hyūga, the one she had always been expected to take, even more so after Kumo tried to steal her.

Father wanted her to be the one striking a fatal blow and avenging uncle Hizashi, but Hinata still remembered the eyes of the Kumo ambassador when he was gasping for air, fighting for his last breath against the hole in his heart she’d made. Her abductor was her first kill that made the Clan believe she would grow up a ruthless fighter, so young and already so precise.

Hinata had never stopped seeing that man in her nightmares. She never wanted to kill again.

Cold fingers touched hers and her bangs whipped wildly in her face when she jerked at the contact she wasn’t an initiator of. Shikamaru-san was staring at her with his cat-like eyes, unblinking and full of an emotion she couldn’t place. “You can at least be both. You need to stop underestimating yourself, Hinata,” he said with quiet urgency.

“D-don’t you, Shikamaru-san?” she found herself saying and immediately covered her mouth with a free hand, mortified. She had never talked back to him like this. Would he be mad? Would he stop talking to her because of her rudeness just like Neji-niisan did?

“No I?” he laughed bitterly but didn’t walk away. If anything, a dangerous gleam was dancing in his eyes, as if he dared her to disagree. “Have you met me?”

“Enough-” she took a deep breath and, before the voice of reason won, countered his illogical statement. “I know you long enough to see through the facade of false ignorance. D-do you have so little trust in your friends that you believe they will abandon you if they knew the truth?”

“They won’t!”

“Then why d-do you hide it? D-do you not trust yourself?”

She had done it… She had managed to upset Shikamaru-san and he was absolutely going to stop talking to her now. Hinata watched him sputter and counted seconds before he too walked away because she wasn’t what he needed her to be. Not nice enough. Not strong enough. Not brave enough. Unable to wait for another rejection any longer, she curled into herself tightly and tried to hide her face in her coat.

“I don’t.”

Hinata’s shocked byakugan met Shikamaru’s dark eyes. He moved faster than she’d been able to register and was now kneeling right in front of her, whispering in a voice so low she could barely hear. “I’m a coward, Hinata. I’m afraid my silence would kill them one day, but I’m also terrified of them looking at me like I’m a crippled wreck. I am an egoist and a damn coward because I want what we have to never change. I never want to be put in a position where I’d have to choose the mission over the team, but maybe if I’m not good enough they won’t even be sent into the fray because of me...”

Hinata looked at him but it felt like she was seeing him for the first time.

“I am a coward,” he repeated hollowly, ”Because I’m consciously dragging them down. Because if our formation never unleashes its full potential, the statistical probability of Ino and Chōji staying alive is 10.3 percent higher.”

Ino-san was hollering at Kiba-kun in the background, Chōji-san was feeding cookie crumbs to Shino-kun’s hive and Hinata was frozen in her place. Shikamaru-san had always been the smartest
one, but he hid it so well most kids in the class simply ignored him. Now she knew why.

All those failed tests and bad grades suddenly began to make sense. He had been sabotaging his team even before it was formed, did it with a full understanding of potential consequences. If his condition had been reported prior to the graduation, Team Ten wouldn't be Ino-Shika-Chō, there would be no Ino-Shika-Chō at all. Shikamaru-san would have been signed over to desk job and… Hinata tried to imagine how could he live with the weight of this plan. Friends staying alive at the price of their lost careers...

"Who was it?" she asked gently. An ugly grimace distorting his features was the only response she got, but it was also a proof.

He fell back on the ground, uncaring for his hair sticking out of the katon-dried circle and landing in a puddle of meltwater. Hinata returned to watching Ino-san dance around the training ground, unwilling to push her luck and giving Shikamaru-san space. He kept staring emptily in the muddy grey sky. For about ten minutes they stayed silent.

Hinata had almost managed to convince herself to speak up and apologize for her rudeness when Shikamaru-san sighed. "His name was Noroshi. He was my first cousin once removed and he used to babysit me a lot when mom and dad were away on missions. He and his teammates died protecting Yagamura when I was seven. If he hadn't been promoted that year, they'd still be alive. All of them still would be here."

Hinata had heard about the battle of Kaminanagawa - the river that for the last five years served as a border between Fire Country and its lost territories in the north, currently annexed by Lightning. Her clansmen had died there too. Some of them were good men, some not, the Clan still mourned them and respected their sacrifice. If not for them defending that settlement and giving their lives to hold the outpost until reinforcements were dispatched, Konoha wouldn't have an armistice with Kumo now. She was sure Shikamaru-san knew it too, his loss simply was more personal.

"And what about all those people Noroshi-san helped to protect?"

Their eyes met again. She reached out to take his hand and - Hinata had never been this bold, yet something in the way he looked at her made her drop the honorific - asked him, "Shikamaru, don't your teammates deserve to know what is happening to you? They haven't left you after all these years and, you said so yourself, they won't go away now if you tell them. But it's their life. Let them make their own choices."

Conflicting emotions were clear on his face, but Hinata didn't back down. "Shino-kun's vision has gone bad before he even entered the Academy. He still was one of the strongest genin in our class. I might be weak, but d-didn't you tell me I too could be of use? What makes you different, Shikamaru? You may not fight with your body quite like Ino-san or Chōji-san do, but your mind is still your greatest weapon. Why won't you let your team be by your side in this?"

The bushes behind them suddenly rustled, losing some of the last year leaves, and a tan face of Naruto-kun snuck out of it. "Hinata-chan's right, you know, Shika? Whatever's wrong with you, the team comes first. Sorry to interrupt by the way, but did you see a hu-uge fat cat with a red ribbon on its right ear? No? Eh, it would suck if Sasuke-teme finds it first. See ya!"

He rattled it all in one breath while Hinata and Shikamaru stared mutely at him. He then rolled out of the bushes, bounced off the ground like a bright rubber ball and disappeared in the tree foliage above exhausted Kiba-kun lying on the ground with his limbs akimbo. The branches shook from the impact and a blob of wet snow got dumped right onto his unsuspecting face.
"Ouch! Gross!" Kiba-kun shrieked, jumping upright and searching for his offender, getting some of the meltwater on heaving Ino-san in the process.

"You did see him too, right?" Shikamaru asked uneasily. She nodded, only now noticing that she still was holding his hand. Blush flooded Hinata's cheeks and it only got worse when he squeezed her fingers in return. "Troublesome… Eh, if even Naruto sings praises to teamwork… Will you help me, Hinata?"

She gulped, nodding again before she even asked with what and Shikamaru offered her a clipped smile. "You're right, as always right. I'm going to tell Ino and Chōji today. Come with me?"

Still riding that courage high, she giggled quietly, "Are you that afraid of what Ino-san is going to do to you?"

His smile grew bolder. "Terrified. But I'll feel better knowing you'd be there. Will you fix me after she's done with me?"

It felt like her face would catch fire at any moment but Hinata didn't look away this time.

"You d-don't ever have to ask, Shikamaru."

"Jackpot! Team Ten and Eight are together at the Training Ground Nine!" Naruto reported excitedly when focus returned to his eyes. Sakura crossed both teams out in her notebook and grinned at him.

"Great job, Naruto! Did you see Kurenai-san there?"

"-nah, she was leaving for Habutae for some dango with a bird-masked ANBU when the clone got there. Didn't follow them, they'd totally sense me. By the way, do you know what's wrong with Shika?"

"What do you mean?" One magenta brow rose, but otherwise, Sakura stayed still, letting Sasuke finish her braid.

"Wrong besides being a lazy ass, dobe?" Uchiha muttered through gritted around a dozen hairpins teeth.

"Umm, yeah? The clone didn't stick around long enough, but he and Hinata-chan were talking about him hiding something from Ino and Chōji?" Naruto scratched his neck, deep in thought. His pupils went wide again and he stilled, taking in new memories.

"Spill," Sasuke grumbled when the blonde almost lit a small apartment with his shit-eating grin.

"Guys, I've got Tora! It's hu-uge! Gotta give it back to the crazy lady!" He darted off the floor and out of the window in a colorful blur, two clones appearing by his side and morphing into Sakura and Sasuke when he was already three roofs away.

"Fantastic."

"Aww, Sasuke-kun~" Sakura crooned sweetly, making the boy shudder, "that's a D-rank pay at the expense of Naruto's clones. Shouldn't you be nice to him for doing all the work? He sure needs some positive feedback."

"I'd donate my share to dobe's wardrobe change as a sign of my appreciation. He can't run around
like a big damn target." He put the last pin into her hair and clapped his hands softly, "All done."

Sakura immediately fished her pocket mirror out of the pouch and sent Sasuke a brilliant smile when their eyes met in the reflection. "Ohh, it looks amazing, thank you! And I think it's a great idea. I'd put my share down too since he's the one to catch that demon cat anyway."

Sasuke shrugged like he didn't care (she knew he did though) and went to study Asuma-san's collection of strange looking weapons, so she returned back to sketching a crude design of a containment seal on the margins of her notebook. She and Inner had a lot to think of.

When Sakura and Kakashi-sensei had passed moderately upscale part of Shadow District and entered a simple two-story apartment complex adorned with empty flowerpots hanging from rackety windowsills and a 'welcome home' doormat at the front door, she still had no idea who the mysterious friends were. She had only been told it would be a surprise. And a surprise it was.

Teri-sensei had clearly been enjoying her sleep, but a romance novel (Sakura knew a bribe when she saw one) and a belated happy birthday wishes turned out to be enough for both of them to be invited for some tea. Sakura stayed silent for most of it, studying a cluttered apartment, filled with books upon books and an accidental touch of antiques. Porcelain figurines, at least 30-piece dinner set and a very delicate tea set displayed on the shelves all were feather-themed - most possibly family heirlooms. The furniture was outdated too, though clearly well-maintained.

Both of her teachers got really serious when a monkey whistle got brought up. Sakura didn’t really get why Kakashi-sensei was so adamant on getting to the core of this mystery if he wasn’t going to put it into the official mission report, but she knew better than to argue with her commanding officer’s decisions. It took her less than half an hour to notice the way they’d been speaking to each other though - as if there was something bigger going on. And then she had put two and two together, getting a mental whiplash from Inner in the process.

Kakashi-sensei hadn’t been exactly favorable towards the current administration when it came to the way it had been treating her and her teammates and now he and Teri-sensei were basically implying someone from Hokage’s clan had broken into Senju estate and stole a family tree, leaving a bomb in the sanctuary. The same sanctuary that a cipher squad detached to crack the place open hadn’t even been able to find. It smelt like a conspiracy that could get people killed and Sakura was not only trusted to be here for the discussion, Kakashi-sensei seemed to actually care for her input.

It was exhilarating. It felt terrific.

She needed her boys to make it work.

Naruto and Sasuke got to Teri-sensei’s place at a quarter past six, a little out of breath and stupefied by finding her and their teachers, both ex and the current one, setting up breakfast like it was the most natural thing in the world. The order to keep everything that would happen in there a secret "or…" only made them more wary.

“Um, sensei? What’s goin’ on?” Naruto asked as soon as the food disappeared from his plate, but it was Sakura who answered.

“Remember the boy that’s been following you around lately? Kono-something?”

“Konohamaru? Yeah, why?” he nodded. The adults in the room didn’t as much as move a single muscle, but the atmosphere had gotten significantly heavier.
“What do you know about him?”

“Well…” Naruto slid on the floor from the couch, sitting by Sakura’s feet. She had noticed by now that he tended to concentrate better when she (or on much rarer occasions Sasuke) was touching him, so she reached out to fluff his unruly blonde hair a little. “I know he’s from a wealthy clan - even his training shuriken are made of ironwood and can cut real deep and he had a coil of real ninja wire on him once - but his parents don’t really care ‘bout him, I think. Like, he gets to sneak out at pretty much any hour and that one time he followed me right into the Flower district. Not the best place for kids his age, ya see.”

Sakura hummed in agreement to let him know she was still paying attention though from the corner of her eyes she was watching Kakashi-sensei and Teri-sensei. Their fingers were moving in a familiar pattern, but too fast for her to keep up with their dialogue. For now, she left it to Inner and raked her fingers through Naruto’s hair. He sighed contentedly and went on.

“Sometimes there’re these two kids, Udon and Moe-something, they call themselves Leaf Prankster Corps. Udon is a crybaby and the girl I’ve only met twice so I don’t really know her. Couple times there was a man following him - wears a bandana, dark glasses, really hates me too. Prolly his teacher, but he’s not good at it ‘cause Kono’s tricks always work on him,” he smiled wryly. “Kono likes to prank people, never gets in trouble though. They just say he lacks a moral compass.”

An abrupt sound of armchair scraping the wooden floor startled him badly when Teri-sensei got out of her recliner and rushed out of the room, cursing. She got back ten seconds later with a stack of scrolls and dumped them unceremoniously on the floor. “Kakashi, one of the children must have-”

“Any idea who?”

“No! Damn, we’ve never thought… How is it even possible?” She was digging through the papers with shaking hands. “Sarutobi, Sarutobi… Here! Sarutobi Konohamaru, class 2-C. Udon… Ise Udon and Moe- Kazamatsuri Moegi. Rings any bells? Anyone?”

Her boys seemed mostly dumbstruck and even though she would be happy to be of help, Sakura had never met these kids. Inner got completely silent in her head, searching for any clue too, yet they both were sure, she’d come up with nothing.

It was Sasuke who voiced the unspoken. “You think one of these two has Senju blood and was at the estate about four months ago, aren’t you?”

Sakura met Kakashi-sensei’s eye and, after a long pause, he said, “If one of them does, either he or she must be dead now and we know they aren’t, or there was someone else. The whistle Naruto found in the sanctuary was lying in the pile of ash. That’s all there’s usually left after the whistle’s done its job.”

“Someone’s taken the family scroll,” Sasuke murmured thoughtfully. “These things only open up with the blood of a clan member. Someone definitely got out of there alive.”

“How do you know the scroll was taken by the intruder, Sasuke-san?” Teri-sensei was still fiddling with the papers on the floor and her voice was light, but Inner in Sakura’s head was screaming danger. Older woman’s face was turning more and more grim as Sasuke explained the torn piece of parchment they’d found. “Where it is now?”

Kakashi-sensei simply handed her a containment scroll, but she didn’t open it, just hid it in the pocket of her bathrobe and with a long-suffering sigh looked at the clock. It was already close to seven am and the blizzard outside the window finally began calming down, letting first grey patches of a heavy
with snow clouds sky show.

“An explanation is in order, I suppose.”

“It’s your call, Teri.”

The woman beckoned Naruto to sit back on the couch between Sakura and Sasuke, smiling at them as they shuffled to free some space for him, but it was a distant, wistful smile.

"Second Shinobi War, as you may know, has never been survival of the fittest, it started as a calculated operation that with clearly specified targets. Powerful clans came to extinction one by one: Uzushio-gakure was obliterated with the fall of Uzumaki, Konoha stays solely on the defensive since the last Senju disappeared, Suna had to join Jishin Dōmei after Sasagani Clan was mysteriously wiped out. We are losing allies and territories and even those villages that stay neutral, do so only to keep the trade going.

Konoha-Uzu Alliance was methodically stripped of its strongest fighters until there was literally a single known to public Uzumaki and Senju left. Some people were quite unhappy with such a turn of events, you see… For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Such is the law on nature.

Tsunade-sama abandoned the village more than twenty years ago and no one had seen her ever since, some people even believe her to be long dead, yet her second cousin’s granddaughter and, let’s call Naruto-san her adoptive grandson for the sake of brevity, are both alive to this day.

Naruto-san is virtually protected by his status as the vessel of Nine-Tailed Beast, but there has always been a contingency watching over him. You do remember Nakadachi-san, don’t you?"

By the way Naruto stiffened Sakura guessed he did, but before she could ask, her own name rang through the still air of the room.

“Sakura-san’s heritage is supposedly known to a chosen few and it was kept this way even in the light of her unfortunate meeting with Araigawa.” Teri-sensei looked her right in the eyes and murmured, “Ino-san had to undergo her initiation much earlier than her father would have preferred, but you seem to have taken her gift in stride, Sakura-san. It is always a pleasure to see a strong addition to kunoichi forces.”

Her gaze shifted to Sakura’s right, sending chills down her spine when sensei’s words were out of her mouth. Stinging. Deliberate.

“Sasuke-san... Your teammates’ benefactor made sure they stay relatively safe. A question for you, if I may. Do you know how come you are still alive?"

"What are you-" he growled darkly, momentarily losing any calm he had. Tomoe in his red eyes were spinning wildly as he hunched in his place. “You dare to insinuate-”

"Right you are, Uchiha-san. I do."

"What do you know about my clan? Who would try to keep me alive if all of them are dead?!" he hissed acidly.

"Uchiha- That one was a special case. Sadly, not much can be proven, but…” she stood up from the floor, leaving the papers a mess, and came up to stand right in front of three of them. Her eyes were strangely blue and Sakura felt uneasy from simply being close to her, like she was lightheaded. Sasuke didn’t budge. "Tell me, Sasuke-san, what has your brother told you that night?"
He blanched, but answered in a clipped voice, "Become stronger. Learn the truth. Avenge."

"And what is the truth, Sasuke?"

"He- I don't know," came a barely audible whisper.

She stepped back then and fell into her recliner suddenly looking as exhausted as Sakura felt. "Don’t get me wrong here, Sasuke-san," she said after a moment of consideration, "I do not imply your brother to be your savior. But there are people both in the village and outside of it whose work is to get to the truth, to sort causes from consequences, to find a pattern and untangle the web of lies, no matter how deep underground it leads. And then there are people whose whole life is devoted to making sure such a devastating blow as the death of the whole clan never happens again. Uchiha massacre was unforeseen. We never estimated the situation to be resolved in such a brutal way and, therefore, were unable to prevent it. What we do believe though... it has never been a one-man job."

Sakura’s fingers were white with the force she had to use to keep Sasuke in his place. His face was ghostly pale. "We," he rasped, "who are we?"

Teri-sensei bowed her head at them in a semblance of a greeting, "Why, San'in no San’ekiyou. It is a pleasure to meet you, Team Seven."

Kakashi was extremely grateful for the mask hiding his smirk as he played who blinks first with pouting Asuma. He wasn’t usually this petty, but, damn, it felt so good to beat his friend in something not kill count related for once.

"Kakashi, I’ve no idea how you did it..." The man finally gave in after almost four minutes, just in time to follow excitedly bouncing over the roofs henged Naruto clones with heavy-lidded from apparent lack of sleep eyes, and yawned again. "They really do cooperate? What trickery is that?"

"They simply have enough motivation. I gather yours are still in an adjustment phase?" Kakashi wiggled his brows playfully, even though on the outside it probably looked like a nervous tick. Asuma's attention was now glued to Sakura anyways.

"They need to sort some things out before I really can start with them. What did you do to the pinkie? I’ve heard she used to be Uchiha fanclub co-host!"

Sakura harrumphed, presumably at something she was sketching in her notebook, but Kakashi suspected she was somehow using Inner to eavesdrop on them. Sasuke glanced at her, then met Kakashi’s eye with an eyeroll of his own and went back to obsessing over Asuma’s collection of sharp goodies.

The tiny apartment was modeled the same way as Kakashi’s and similarly didn’t exactly feel lived in since Sarutobi only moved in two months ago when he had returned from Takagishūto. The display of prized weaponry on the wall was almost the only thing that betrayed a permanent presence of a human being here and it was a quite impressive one to be honest, even in comparison to Gai’s, the man as passionate about bukijutsu as he was about youthfulness.

Sakura turned the page, chewed on her lower lip pensively and went back to trying to figure out her seal theory dilemma. No ‘Sasuke-kun’, no fake fawning...

"I thank gods every day she is not," Kakashi conceded. "She's scary enough as it is."

"Ma-an, I envy you..."
Kakashi offered him a happy who's-laughing-now eye smile. "Yours know each other for how long? Since before they were even born? Why are you waiting?"

Asuma's expression turned sour and he lit another cigarette. For a while they sat in silence interrupted only by Sakura's muttering about stuffing three-dimensional objects in two-dimensional space and puffs of smoke escaping Asuma's lips. Sasuke made a face when the smell reached him and opened the window in the living room wider, letting cold winter air in.

"I'm not sure this generation of Ino-Shika-Chō is going to work, Kakashi."

Of all surprises this morning seemed to be filled with, including the news of Sannin leading an underground resistance in the heart of Konoha from gods know where and an actual possibility of an unaccounted little Senju frolicking around the village, Asuma's admission was what finally made Kakashi bite his tongue to keep from cursing. "Are you... sure?" he inquired carefully. No matter how pissed Asuma initially was for being saddled with an 'easy' team - a bribe, he had spat back then, the old geezer just tries to get in my good graces - he seemed to have grown fond of the three already. To disband them now would not only be a disgrace on all three noble clans but a personal blow to Asuma's ego.

"They're codependent, Kakashi, and not in a good way. If we were at peace, I'd let it slide, but Shikamaru's going to lead them into an early grave if he doesn't quit his crap."

"You tried telling him that?"

"He's a Nara. The only opinion that matters is his own." Asuma forcefully bit on the butt of the cigarette and let a billowing cloud of smoke out through his nose. "I swear if he doesn't find his beacon soon... I'll petition for this team to be disbanded."

Kakashi shivered but stayed silent, letting Asuma talk it out.

"He can never find her, or him, you know. They may not even be born yet or dead already... Honestly, it sucks. Shikaku is a lucky man to have both Yoshino and Inoichi, but what if his son gets the short straw? Uncontrolled genius is worse than a squad of law-abiding idiots, I swear. Remember that pal, Noroshi? He frickin' exploded a full five hectares of forest and riverbank when his beacon was killed. He went ballistic. I just don't know what's worse in the boy's case, to have and to lose or to never have at all."

"Are you a hundred percent sure it's that bad?" Kakashi couldn't help but wonder. Beacons were lifetime partners in many ways, some innocent, some not, and a part of Nara Clan deal with their patron god of the hidden realm. The bond with the beacon was supposed to keep a Nara from abandoning reason in their search for knowledge and merging with the shadows before their time came. Rumors said the smarter Nara was, the more shadows answered their call and the stronger was the pull driving them under.

Asuma flicked the butt of the cigarette into the ashtray and immediately lit a new one.

"Shikaku has two to keep him in check if he dives in too deep, but, figures, Shikamaru ranks even higher on that Nara crazily smart list. Yoshino actually gave me the whole mom-talk about how they are still waiting to teach him any hiden techniques because they're afraid shadows will consume him. That stuff is pure nightmare material, Kakashi."

"Shikamaru should've quit his bullshit long ago," Sakura grumbled from the other side of the room. "One day Ino'll grow tired of waiting for him to come clean and he'll need no beacon anymore." She didn't even look up from her calculations, a perfect image of ignorance if not for the fact that she had
actually managed to overhear their conversation. Kakashi made a mental note to ask how she overrode Asuma's much weaker than his own but still kicking sound canceling seal while the man choked on the smoke that went to the wrong pipe.

"How did you-" Sarutobi croaked between coughs, "I swear I activated-"

"Hn." Sasuke quirked his brow and very pointedly looked at the polished almost to a mirror state gunbai among other weaponry on the wall. Sakura's eyes that met Asuma's through the reflection were very much not impressed with jōnin's mental capabilities.

Kakashi tsked chidingly at the two menaces that seemingly decided to give his friend a heart attack. "Children, don't bully him, that's rude."

The girl pushed to her feet and sauntered into the kitchen with a slightly annoyed expression, amplified by an ink smudge on her forehead. "Could you please cancel the dampener? Asuma-san was hard enough to read, but with you it's just awkward, sensei, mask and all-"

Sometimes Kakashi really seemed to forget she was just a newly minted genin. After years of dealing with kekkei genkai and powerful jutsu thrown left and right, he still needed to adjust to the idea of his kids using pretty simple but nonetheless effective means of doing ‘ninja stuff’ as Naruto called it. He wiped Asuma's chakra out of the sloppy seal and repeated himself, gesturing for Sakura and Sasuke to come sit by the table.

By that time Asuma finally recovered from his coughing fit and slumped in his chair with a look of complete defeat. “This is just anticlimactic, Kakashi… Your kids pull off all these stunts and listen to you and actually do what you tell ‘em to do while I, apparently, am being kept in the dark by mine? Alright, I hope you didn’t come to me to brag. Spill it.”

Kakashi didn’t even get to answer when two things happened at once. A whiplash from a burst shadow clone momentarily stunned him, overwriting past two hours worth of time with faint memories of visiting the MAD, accepting and witnessing the completing of the mission. Naruto barreled through the window with a happy ‘I’m back, ‘ttebayo!’ just a second later, wide blood-smeared scratches already disappearing from his tan face and hands. Two of his clones henged as his teammates dissolved into white puffs of chakra as soon as he was sure Sasuke wasn’t looking.

“Maa, now that everyone’s here…” Kakashi intoned, watching the kid close the window and flop on the floor by Sakura’s feet. “Actually, we need to talk about Konohamaru.”

Asuma’s eye twitched. He patted his pockets for a pack of cigarettes, found it empty and sourly muttered, “Oh, shit, here we go again…”

Chapter End Notes

Hi guys, Kay here! You see, usually I prefer to disregard Boruto, but some facts just got stuck with me and crawled into this story while I wasn't looking. I had to rewrite this chapter almost from the scratch twice as a result. This version I'm at least somewhat content to post. There will be more information on Sannin no San’ekiyū in the following chapters and not to forget as well, but if any of you wonder, the name literally means straightforward,
sincere, and well-informed friends of the Sannin, sponsored by Confucius. What a rad lad.
As always thank you for staying with me and this story! Your feedback means the world to me!
Much love, very tired but satisfied Kay <3
sound of silence

Chapter Summary

an interlude in Sound

Chapter Notes

The song for this chapter is *The Sound of Silence by Simon & Garfunkel*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The feeling of wrongness woke him from a hibernation-like sleep when the old clock standing on the steel table was struggling to move its shorter hand past a discolored 'two' symbol. *Midday in Konoha*, his mind supplied steadily, *thirty-five hours till the next summons from Anko*.

Then he heard the song.

A low hum hung in the humid air, almost an ultrasound vibration that echoed in his bones. It was crawling into the darkroom from not by much brighter outside through an opened window. Children knew better than come in uninvited, Jiraiya preferred dry coldness of seal-supported climate kept in his laboratory to the damp, stifling heat of the tropical rainforest, he wouldn't disrupt it, which left Tsunade. She must have visited while he was meditating. She was getting restless lately…

The song hitched and an off-key note made him grimace. Its master did not have a perfect pitch per se, but even thousands of kilometers could hardly be a reason for such a mistake. The message was important. The sender was impatient.

A silky touch of hastily thrown on yukata was irritating his skin but he had already made peace with this untimely awakening. The song was rarely for him, the girl was one of Tsunade’s contacts recruited before their exodus from Konoha, yet he could hear it now - a nervous beat that made the forest outside still in anticipation. He grabbed Kusanagi and slipped out into the forest through the window, disheveled and barefoot. Here in Sound he long since used to forgoing his geta altogether, it only hindered his movements through the covered in the gnarled roots jungle floor.

He dove into the labyrinth of bushes, small trees and vines with a practiced grace of an apex predator.

Branches of centuries-old evergreens, intertwined to the point when even Ichiru could not tell where one ended and another began, ate all the sunlight, letting only some stray rays filter through the canopy here and there and color the understory in vibrant garnet. A family of binturong scrambled up at the sight of him following the song, their tails flicking agitatedly. They were a familiar bunch, used to human presence and almost domesticated by an avid animal lover Shizune. Now, however, they felt the song too and it seemed to unsettle them. He passed the bearcats and hastily twisted a tangled cascade of his raven hair into a loose bun before ducking under the tail of a lazily eyeing him boa constrictor.
“...s-sage,” the snake greeted him, “bles-st be your chas-se.”

“Yours as well, Fusayo,” he nodded politely, smile twinkling in the depths of his yellow eyes. She was one of the Ryūchi Cave, not his summons but a great company nonetheless.

The song beckoned him further and he disappeared into the jungle, led by its call.

Blue whips of northern grass had returned back into the ground quite some time ago but a ripple of word-like whispers was still ringing in his ears. The vision they had planted in his brain was painfully familiar: a narrow street barely lit by paper lanterns hidden beneath the layer of already melting snow. A merry group of drunken men clinking their cups in old man Tsuhama’s izakaya. Graffiti on the wall of an abandoned bookshop, painted over until the images blurred together in one incoherent mess. Here, in between the bright splashes of neon color were written the words no one would risk to say out loud - a message for him that became a smear of paint as soon as the connection faded.

He stood at the edge of a perfectly round glen, silent and unmoving until the thick crimson canopy of Akagorin exploded with sound, warning him of the arrival of someone willing to risk his ire and their hide.

"What did she say, tō-san?" came a cheerful voice from his right. Like mother, like son.

“How many times shall I tell you I am not your father, boy? Have some respect for the dead.”

The words stayed the same through the years but as time went he had found he meant them less and less. This child was not his blood, did it really matter? No. Ichiru, first of many others in his care, had taught him a valuable lesson about the blood of the covenant and water of the womb.

“With all due respect, you were the one to help me see the world for the first time, Orochi-tōsan and I don’t give a flip about the dead.” The boy casually passed the threshold of the glen and kneeled onto the dry red ground, long blonde hair fanning around him like a cape. He pressed his hands to the remnants of the cobalt grass for a moment, listening to something only he could hear, then threw his head back to look at him. “Why did she call for you, tō-san? What happened? What did she say?”

Orochimaru did not even try to hide a smirk.

“Unruly brat, you are Tsunade all over. Always sticking your nose in every problem.”

“Last time you’ve said I’m dad’s copy.”

“’Last time’ you challenged Tayuya to a poetry contest and came this close-” he pressed his index fingers together, leaving barely a millimeter in between, “-to getting your arse handed to you by an adolescent kunoichi which is right up Jiraiya’s alley.”

Ichiru stood up gracefully and stretched with a dreamy smile, “That was a fun one. I won in the end, didn’t I? She stopped swearing for two months!”

“And the whole Den was walking on their tiptoes waiting for her to explode. You were away, boy, and we were here to reap what you have sown.” He tried to look stern, but this child could see right through him.

“It still was fun, tō-san. Now, quit trying to slither away from the topic. What did she say?”
“Your great-grandfather turned out to be much more prolific than we knew. Another child with mokuton was detected in Konoha. Thankfully, by our people.”

“Did she give you the name?” Ichiru’s accented by bronze kohl eyes narrowed, lips thinned into a pale line. He was a smart child raised by three geniuses, albeit in extremely varying fields - he knew what was at stake. Orochimaru glanced at the glen for the last time and beckoned the boy to follow him.

“By the night’s end Anko shall have it. After that, we plan.”
The forest, no longer disrupted by the song, met them with a deafening cacophony of cheers, chirping and rustling leaves.

"Icchan!"

A bright cloud of pale pink and vibrant purple flashed past Orochimaru and right into Ichiru's welcoming hands as soon as they entered the territory of the Den. The yell echoed in the hollowed-out barks of the evergreens that served as stairs to the living areas and two more colorful blurs soared above the low roof of the mess hall - one of the five structures built solely on the ground.

"You didn't say you're staying for one more day!" Sakon whined, trying to push Tayuya away and failing spectacularly. Ukon opened his mouth to say something, then rubbed his smeared with yellow paint nose and frowned.

"Orochi-sama, Jiraiya-oji said you won't leave the lab until tomorrow? Did something happen? Is Suigetsu unstable again?" His dark eyes were narrowed warily as he bit his lip. At the mention of Suigetsu Sakon and Tayuya both let go of Ichiru and nervously looked back at the tree that hid the entry to the underground level of the lab among its roots.

Orochimaru's lips curled in a semblance of a smile.

Suigetsu was a relatively new addition to their little band of mischiefs as Jiraiya fancied calling the dwellers of the Akagorin Den. Ichiru had brought the unruly boy from Kiri about a year ago when another wave of kekkei genkai purge was high on the rise. It took them all some time to get accustomed to checking the water in the well for chakra signatures before grabbing the bucket - jungle climate wasn't ideal, but it still was much better than death by the hand of a rabid Mizukage. In the end, he fit in well with the rest of the children Ichiru and Jiraiya brought home over the years.

"Suigetsu fares better now, but he still needs to spend about twenty hours a day in the reservoir. Your little bet has worn him out." Orochimaru looked down at three adolescents sternly, knowing perfectly they would hardly take him seriously in his current disheveled state. Still, someone in this madhouse of a Den had to be the voice of reason. "I expected better of you, Ukon."

The boy frowned again and muttered, "It was raining, I thought there would be enough water for him not to, you know…" He glanced at Sakon and Tayuya for help.

"Suigetsu said he'd be fine!"

Orochimaru met Tayuya's stubborn brown eyes levelly but she didn't back down. Ah, where were the days these children clung to his every word as if he hung the moon and actually listened to his prescriptions? Maybe leaving them with Tsunade and Jiraiya for so long while he tried to infiltrate that Akatsuki group hadn't been such a good idea. Well, at least most of them still remembered not to swear in his presence.
Tayuya grumbled something scathing.

Not to swear too much at least.

He sighed, too tired even in spite of being awakened not more than two hours ago, and regally marched towards the mess hall. The brood, Ichiru included, followed him silently and waited as he settled into his usual place, unwound a leather cord holding his hair in a messy bundle and let it fall freely onto the floor.

"Suigetsu had to be restored from a little more than a flask volume, young lady," he explained in his best teaching voice. "It takes time and dedication and skill neither you nor he does not possess. I would prefer you not undo the progress we have made in past months."

It was not the first time he had to lecture them about the safety precautions, no. Every single one of them was a walking danger to themselves at some point and it took time and dedication to get them to where they were now. Still, he could understand their restlessness and the need to work some steam off: when he, Jiraiya and Tsunade had been their age, they were shinobi of Konoha with all the duties their ranks implied at the time. When Ichiru was their age, he was already a chūnin of Kiri and had to navigate a double play what Water Country was. Tayuya, Sakon and Ukon, Jirobō, Jūgo… Even Shizune to some extent - they were living a very sheltered life in the Den. They were raised as shinobi but rarely had a chance to act like ones.

It was the least Orochimaru and his partners could do. It was what people like them deserved - peace and quiet and help.

"Spacing out, tō-san?"

"Reminiscing more likely," he replied to Ichiru and shooed young monsters away. They could be of use somewhere else for now and judging by the paint stains on their clothes and faces they had been before he and Ichiru made an appearance. When the trio was out of sight, Orochimaru beckoned the boy closer. "If you are going to stick around, be of use and help me with this mess. Why didn't you leave already, if I may ask?"

Warm fingers pressed into his scalp, untangling the knots that got there after he'd been dunked into a reservoir by high on the pollen Jiraiya. Meditation helped him to keep his temper in check, but now his hair was a disaster. No wonder the children weren't obeying him anymore.

"I can hear your brooding thoughts," Ichiru playfully tugged on a loose strand and clicked his tongue. "My kaleidoscope is tailing the target, but nothing suspicious came up so far. I have another ten hours, a day maybe before I'll have to head out, and since you were busy keeping your evil tendencies in check and mom is currently out cold with that seal stuff for Suigetsu-kun, I decided to stick around. Dad's a bad influence on the kids when he isn't balanced out by you two."

Orochimaru hummed in agreement. "Shizune?"

"Nee-chan's left for Bone, took Kin with her. Our stock of rice is running low."

They sat in silence for a while and he felt like nodding off for a moment wasn't such a bad idea when Ichiru cleared his throat and asked lightly, "Do you miss it?"

One yellow eye opened lazily, making Orochimaru's resemblance to his summons even more uncanny. "It?"

"Konoha." The boy shifted uncomfortably and looked away. "Mom does, I know. She has pictures in her room - of the village, great-grandpa and grandma Mito, a photo of uncle Tobirama, some civs
too. Dad likes to act like he's a man of the world and yada yada, but he writes about Konoha, isn't he? All those epic adventures that always lead home... You're the only one who never talks about it. Why?"

Orochimaru straightened the sleeves of his yukata and gently took the braid Ichiru had just finished away from his steady fingers.

He was old enough to know the truth behind how they all had ended up so far away from the Fire and in the forests his clan once inhabited long ago, but the boy had never shown any interest, at least not out loud. Neither Orochimaru nor Tsunade and Jiraiya hadn't seen any point in lying about his origin so Ichiru knew about Dan and his 'heroic mission'. He was aware of his roots, even though Senju family scroll was still in Konoha. He knew about the wars, past and present both, but Kiri was the village that had shaped him as a shinobi and, therefore, his opinion on the Leaf was quite... peculiar.

Orochimaru couldn't blame him for mistrust. Konoha was universally famous for many deeds, it's just fairness wasn't one of them. Who knows, maybe Ichiru's wariness was for the best. As for his question-

"Everyone I have ever cared for is either dead or here in the Den except for, perhaps, one student of mine and a couple of acquaintances here and there. Konoha…"

His expression grew distant. Even though he had never been prone to nostalgia, the feeling of loss was still there, buried deep in his bones with the seals he had carved almost four decades ago. He hadn't managed to forget neither a tiny apartment of his aunt nor Jiraiya's rotten place or Tsunade's homely estate. He carried his students' first scars, lost teeth and empty with betrayal eyes with him everywhere he went, they were etched in his memory along with Anko's first words since Inoichi had broken her seal.

*I missed you even when I didn't know you.*

For Orochimaru it was different. He missed Konoha in spite of everything vile and wrong she kept secreted away. He still longed for those dark nights with Tsunade and Jiraiya in Nara forests, for drifting above the red roofs serenades from Inuzuka kennels, for his teammate's infectious smile when young Namikaze's had managed to beat yet another seal-

The breath caught in his throat and he shook his head, locking the memories away before they could undo his balance any further. Time was a bad healer after all.

"Tō-san?"

It felt like surfing after a dive into a cold mountain stream. Orochimaru blinked, shrugging the numbness off and turned to the source of the sound. Ichiru was still watching him, but his easygoing grin turned unsure.

"Konoha has fallen into the wrong hands, boy," he answered when the voice returned to him, "and we, Jiraiya and I, are not without blame. But we had to make a choice and I refuse to regret the one I have made. We all began a new life here in the Sound and, as your mother says, we could use some peace. But she is also sentimental and too forgiving for her own good."

"Must be a healer's thing," a raspy voice came from the direction of the kitchen, accompanied by a ruffled, but more or less sane looking Jiraiya. He staggered towards the table, a glass of water in one hand and an unopened scroll in the other, and lowered his body on the floor as if it was made of fragile china. He glanced at Ichiru and whispered conspiratorially, "Oro is mad at Konoha because
they closed his favorite hole-in-the-wall. You know how he is, holding grudges and all..."

His words were met by two synchronously raised brows.

"Oi, cut it, it's creepy!" He waved a hand at them, laughing. Unfortunately, it was the one with the glass and water splashed out in a wide arch, threatening to once again wet Orochimaru's hair.

One kawarimi later Jiraiya was wiping his face, Ichiru was unsuccessfully trying not to snigger and Orochimaru was contemplating his life choices. When a lifetime ago yet uncorrupted by power Sarutobi Hiruzen had told him Benzaiten herself had blessed him with luck by leaving that shed skin in his aunt's pouch, he had not expected her blessing to be this.

Jiraiya growled and slammed his hands into a seal with a grin promising retaliation and chaos. Ichiru looked between the two of them, laughter glimmering in his eyes, and dissolved in a flurry of golden pollen not a second too late - Kusanagi left its saya and sliced the air with a low hiss. Jiraiya, left with no choice but to abandon the jutsu and retreat, swore.

"Gonna play dirty, teme?"

Orochimaru's brow twitched in a mix of annoyance and anticipation as he countered the first blow. Sparks flew when a kunai got stuck in an ornate tsuba and melted from a mild raiton charged seal imbued in the metal. Orochimaru backflipped, slapping Jiraiya in the face with his braid, and hissed, not bothering to hide a smirk. "If Tsunade finds out you are using katon in close quarters again, she would deck you, dobe. I came to tolerate your presence, so stick to non-destructive techniques and -"

A clone appeared behind Jiraiya and unceremoniously kicked him in the butt, growling " - watch your back."

White hair on the older man's head turned into needles, dispelling the clone as he was propelled out of the closest window by the impact. He landed right onto the sore spot with a yelp.

"You bastard!"

"... and they're right at it again."

"So I see."

Orochimaru spared a glance towards the shrine entrance. It almost cost him at least ten centimeters of his braid, but he caught a glimpse of leaning on the doorway Ichiru and tiredly smiling Tsunade. A pale, but quite solid Suigetsu was peeking over her shoulder with wide eyes. Ah, yes, the boy was yet to get used to the usual routine of the Den.

Then Jiraiya descended on him in a flurry of kicks and colorful expletives. Now it was time to get serious.

"No broken bones today, do you idiots hear me?!"

They must have yelled something back, but he wasn't sure. Adrenaline was making his blood run faster and all Orochimaru could hear was his and Jiraiya's heartbeat, her and Ichiru's distant laughter and children's cheers. It was exhilarating. It was grounding. It was home.

Blessings, it turned out, could come in many forms.
Sorry for the delay, a lot's been going on in my head lately. Not to sound like a special snowflake (though I know I do), but here's something that must have been said probably long ago. I can understand concrit and there were many comments that actually helped me to fix some slips and issues I've missed. The wording, however, means a lot.

I get it, some people may be unhappy with the way I narrate this story, it's up to you to feel that way. However, htgr was till now and still will be heavily POV alternating. This is the style I am comfortable to write in, this is how I see htgr. If that's not for you, I'm sorry, but I'm not going to change that. There are thousands of other stories in the Archive, I hope you find some that fit your interests and vision.

Once I've been told that stories we write we write for ourselves. If I as an author am unhappy with what I make, there will always be a deep-seated feeling of dissatisfaction inside me no matter how many positive reviews I am going to get. And if I write the story I want to read, that's what I will get it the end - the story I've always wanted. Even if some people don't like it or the way it's been told.

That said, if you see a grammar mistake, point it out and I'll be thankful and happy to fix it. English is not my native language and I know I make mistakes, lots of them.

If you see an inconsistency in timeline, tell me and I'll figure it out or at least explain why it happens this way in htgr verse. I'm always ready to talk.

If you think I should change the way I write, plot and narration wise, thank you for your opinion, you have been heard. I hope you can respect my choices.

Kay
people do bad things to make themselves feel good

Chapter Summary

Everybody needs some sleep but conspiracies wait for no one.

Chapter Notes

The song for this chapter is **Bad Blood by Seafret**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Kakashi, I can’t believe you’re taking the old man's side! Konohamaru’s just a kid-”

Naruto scratched his cheek. The wounds from Tora-oni’s claws had already disappeared, but the skin was still new and itchy. It was very distracting.

“-eight years old child-”

This argument was leading nowhere, everyone could see it, but Asuma-san refused to budge. Naruto glanced at Kaka-sensei, desperately waiting for him to drop the Senju-bomb and be done already. He had spent lots of chakra on holding *henge* on the clones stable even with Kurama’s guidance, so much that he had already burned through a very early breakfast at Teri-sensei's house. Naruto was hungrier than Kaka-sensei’s Pack after a full day of training with the team, which was *starving*.

“-course he would do stupid things! What do you all want me to do? Adopt him? First the old geezer, now you... Konohamaru has a father! Have any of you thought what it would to Ryūen? He’s a husk of a man I remember but he tries, I swear he does…”

Naruto clambered on a chair next to a frowning Sakura-chan and hopelessly thumped his forehead on the table. His belly rumbled loudly in protest to the unfolding drama.

Asuma-san didn’t even listen to what Kaka-sensei had to say! No, he just kept ranting on and on about Kono’s father and his feelings like it mattered. Kono had never bragged about his family but from what Naruto had gathered there was no love lost between him and his clan. They might be wealthy as hell and give him all the cool stuff, but they just weren’t there when it counted. Maybe that was why Kono started following him around like a lost duckling. Sakura-chan called it *impron*... *impriv*...

**Imprinting, kit. That’s called imprinting,** Kurama muttered in the back of his mind.

*Yeah, that,* Naruto agreed, happy to have someone to talk to. At this rate, they weren’t going to get back to training till lunch and Kaka-sensei might decide they have to skip it...

Naruto froze when the thought registered fully.

*I did that too, didn't I?* he asked the Fox sheepishly. *With Sakura-chan and Sasuke and sensei?*
Kurama sighed.

I might be able to hear your thoughts, but I am no mind reader, kit. Stop fretting and explain.

-uh… do I depend too much on them? I shouldn't, right? Like, it's not as if I'm following them 'round just 'cause. We're a team, 'ttebayo! But I go to Harunos every day, eat their food and Sasuke always brings something to share for lunch and I don't… he gnawed on the inside of his cheek, not really wanting to voice his concerns to Kurama and make them real. I don't want to be a burden-

Oh, Sage… Naruto felt imaginary huff of exasperation on his skin, could swear he heard a rustle of leaves above the mind-Oetsugawa, felt the grass flattening as the wind rushed through his and Kurama's clearing. You really have no idea how family works. Kushina must be so livid in the afterlife right now.

What does it have to do with the family?

Something touched Naruto's foot, interrupting the dialogue. It bumped into his dangling in the air sheen twice, sharp and timed, and let go. He looked up from where he was sprawled on top of his folded hands, but nothing was out of order. Asuma-san was still building up excuses for Kono's father, Sakura-chan was watching the man intensely, Sasuke pretended he had nothing to do with any of this and Kaka-sensei… Oh.

The moment their eyes met the jōnin nudged Naruto with his knee again, signing for him to -

S. H. O. W.

Naruto blinked at him, not talk-blinked, but squeezed his eyes and widened them comically as if asking, what? He could understand the code - Sakura-chan and Sasuke made sure of it, even taught Mebuki-san some simple words in the process - but he'd totally bust himself trying to reach out for Kaka-sensei with his much shorter legs, so this way had to do.

S. C. A. R.

Ah, it made sense.

The thing was, Naruto didn't come out of his first meeting with monkey whistle as unharmed as he thought in the beginning. Kurama had managed to save him from turning into a pile of ash and healed most of the damage, but an ugly whistle-shaped scar was now forever etched where the bomb had made the first contact with the skin. Kakashi-sensei had told him that no shinobi would probably recognize it for what it really was because the whistle never left anything but dust after it blew up, but he strongly advised Naruto to hide his palm under the bandages just to be on the safe side. For a while at least.

So sensei wanted him to show off the scar? Naruto shrugged, uncoiled the bandage and thumped his left hand palm up on the table.

Asuma-san stopped midword, raising a curious brow at him.

Kakashi-sensei placed a nasty looking scroll next to Naruto's hand. It unrolled with a flick of his chakra charged finger, revealing a shiny wooden bird, and a thin almost ultrasound whistle filled the room.

"Kakashi, what the fu-"

Asuma-san's dark eyes widened as he staggered away from the whistle, but Naruto's stare was fixed
on the thing that had almost killed him. What if it wasn’t him, who grabbed it but Sasuke? Or Sakura-chan? The sound was pulsing in his ears, making him sick in the stomach.

Kakashi-sensei cleared his throat and slid the scroll towards still mortified Asuma-san across the table as if the thing was tainted. "Your nephew did something very stupid, Saru, and, if not for a special circumstance, my team’d be one member down. I’m not saying it’s your responsibility to deal with this crap, but-

"Did you find it at the estate?" Asuma-san interrupted sensei. He sounded resigned to Naruto's ears, but not the way Iruka-sensei usually was when Naruto's pranks spiraled out of control. This is going to get people killed resigned. His hand hovered above the whistle for a second while he waited for an answer. Sensei nodded and man's expression turned grim.

A thin coat of smoky chakra enveloped his fingers protectively. He exhaled, perfecting the unnamed jutsu, and picked the bomb up carefully. The whistling ceased.

"Oh no..."

Sakura’s eyes were trained on Hokage's youngest son - sensei trusted him so much and yet they couldn’t simply talk it out. Teri-sensei had played mind-games with them too. Why everything had gotten so difficult at once? Why? A little less than eight hours ago (it felt like it had happened in another life now) Kakashi-sensei had said they were to visit his friends. Friends... That’s not how Sakura imagined friendship work.

Would you trust Ino-pig with all that crap, long face? Would you really just come up to her and say ‘Hey, my grandma was an Uzumaki heir, Naruto has a demon in him and Sasuke goes into a full-fledged panic attack from a bright enough flashbang. Ah, and also there’s a secret group your dad is a part of and a death pit under the village. I’m Haruno Sakura and here’s my nuthouse pass’~

Sakura bristled internally, It’s not what I meant and you damn know it! If you wanted to hold hands and chat about pretty boys, then maybe Akame-obaasan was right and you shouldn’t have graduated!~ Inner erupted in a screech like a volcano, her volatile emotions too fierce and close to the surface as she spat out, You’re a shinobi, Sakura, they lie and steal and kill! That’s not a shitty romance novel, sometimes you have to manipulate your own precious people if you want them to live long and fucking prosper. Suck it up and play your bloody part!~

She wanted to argue with Inner, to tell her off but… her brighter half was right. Anyway, it was too late to play pretend now. The hitaiate was a familiar weight on top of her head, the weight of the consequences of her choices. Sakura squared her shoulders and looked closer at the jutsu Asuma-san was casting.

Looks like hiden to me~ Inner cooled out as fast as she blew up and was following man's every move, completely unconcerned by the intricacies of human interaction.

Chakra spilled from Asuma-san's cupped hands like a small waterfall of odorless smoke and disintegrated upon contacting the surface of the table. His eyes were closed but Sakura could see how they moved around rapidly below the puffy lids. A secret technique or not, what he was doing looked pretty innocent, just weird. Then he spoke up, the sound of his voice coarse as nails scraping the glass.

“’It’s an old one, fūinjutsu could probably even be an authentic Uzumaki craft. I bet it’s from the old
man’s personal collection, only he still keeps stuff like this.”

*Says a man who has a whole wall dedicated to the deadliest weapons of the century!~*

While Sakura was in absolute agreement with Inner’s quip, she mostly latched onto the Uzumaki part. The very concept of being of Clan still was new to her and she had no idea what to make of it, but one thing she knew for sure - she wanted to know hers and Naruto’s legacy, even if only to decide whether she wanted to honor it or forget and move on.

The smoke in Asuma-san’s hands suddenly cleared, leaving the whistle lying on his bare skin. It turned out to be deceptively harmless when handled by a Sarutobi. Sakura wanted to see it crushed to pieces. Judging the amount of muttered expletives, the jōnin seemed to share the sentiment.

He placed the whistle back on the scroll and sealed it away before venturing into his bedroom. Her teammates watched him warily as he ambled back with a new pack of cigarettes in one hand and a bottle of sake in the other.

“Isn’t it a bit early for that?” Kakashi-sensei asked him faux-lazily.

“Shut up. Or no, tell me I’m not going crazy, Hatake.” Asuma-san drowned at least a third of a bottle in one go and carefully placed it on the table. Even in an obvious state of distress he was mostly keeping his cool, the teeth marks on the cigarette filter and rapidly emptying bottle of sake being the only evidence of how cracked the situation was. “Only one death is recorded in the whistle and it carries a strong residue of *mokuton*. The problem is, it’s about two months old and the last Senju washed her hands of everything Konoha-related two decades ago. What does it have to do with Konohamaru?”

Sensei rolled his eye in response. “I’m not here to question your brother’s parenting methods, Asuma, but someone has to explain to the boy what could happen if a less sturdy than Naruto shinobi grabbed the whistle. Break-in is bad enough, but running around the village with high-grade explosives? That’s not pranking, man. This,” he indicated the charred scroll, “is the result.”

Sakura stared at the smoking man icily. How deep in denial he had to be to ignore all the hints? Kakashi-sensei wasn’t keen on playing mind games with his friend, but Asuma-san seemed to miss the magnitude of Konohamaru’s possible offense and they needed his cooperation to find the unknown Senju and keep him or her safe until Teri-sensei got a word from Tsunade-sama. Even if it meant they had to resort to foul play.

Sakura had a hard time wrapping her mind around the existence of Sannin no San’ekiyyū and said Sannin looking out for Naruto and her family. She still couldn’t believe her whole team had just been unofficially recruited, hadn’t it been? Teri-sensei’s history crash course barely explained a thing and she couldn’t even sic Inner onto it, not when she needed all her attention on Asuma-san. It would have to wait for now.

Kakashi-sensei signaled her to begin.

“Housebreaking,” she murmured, raising a finger as she made a point, and her voice was steady. “Theft of confidential information. An attempt at domestic terrorism. Quite a list for an eight-year-old, Sarutobi-san.”

Asuma-san visibly paled, his deeply tanned skin acquiring a grayish tint to it. Graffiti and light vandalism was easy to ignore when the culprit was Hokage’s grandson but these accusations… Sakura had had her fix of T&I, she didn’t even want to imagine the possibilities.
"Add harboring a Senju to it... Konohamaru may not even be aware of the depths of his offense, but ignorance of the law is no excuse. I believe you know the law and what it entails."

"Harboring… a Senju?" Man's expression closed off immediately and he turned to sensei. "Kakashi, this is not funny. You want to train the girl for Interrogation Unit and choose me as a practice dummy? Fine by me, but that’s too much!"

Unfortunately - and absolutely expectedly - Kakashi-sensei still seemed to have high hopes regarding Asuma-san's mental capability. Or not?

"Funny?" he spoke up, silencing her retort, and his voice was so gentle Sakura felt fear crawling on her skin like Shino's bugs. "You think finding scraps of your mother's kimono that your nephew uses as a cape in a recently unsealed Senju estate was funny? Or maybe finding this cursed whistle in the sanctuary of all places was? Watching my teammate burn was not funny, Asuma. Looking the Fox in the eyes was not funny."

He exhaled shakily. Somewhere down in the streets a dog howled. Then another. Kakashi-sensei stood up and rounded the table to stand in front of Asuma-san. When he began talking again, his voice was heavy with emotion.

“If he finds out, what your nephew's done can as well be the downfall of your clan. It's not like Sarutobi don’t have enemies waiting for any misstep. Damn, I couldn't care less for your glorious father, but you used to be his favorite and you’ve been out of the picture for years. You don’t know how fucked up the situation is right now. If shit blows up, you’ll be the first to go down!"

Asuma-san swallowed nervously, but forced out a chuckle, “Kurenai would be unhappy.”

“She won’t be the only one,” sensei retorted flatly. “And they say I’m emotionally constipated.”

At that Asuma-san seemed to visibly deflate. He lit another cigarette, making already foggy with smoke room even harder to breathe in. “So Konohamaru lives up to the Clan’s reputation."

"Exactly, and short of demanding the answer from Hokage himself, your nephew turns out to be our best shot. Listen, I would gladly work around you for your own plausible deniability, but unless the Hokage or your brother had an affair with a member of the Founder's clan, Konohamaru was not alone in the estate. Someone let him in and that's not the person the whistle turned into a pile of ash. The kid was in the estate at least a couple weeks before that if your date is correct. From what we've backtracked, he either lost the whistle there or left it in the sanctuary intentionally, stealing a piece of the family scroll instead."

"Senju family tree? It's not lost?" the man choked and doubled over in a coughing fit when the smoke went into the wrong pipe.

"Was it declared as such?" Sakura wondered. Senju had used to be a big deal, but she kind of thought that with the Wars never leaving Konoha doorstep village leadership would pay more attention to defense and negotiations, not to the old scrolls, completely useless in the absence of the actual Clan. It was just… weird.

"You know any other clans hailing from the Land of Sound keeping their scrolls at Takara?" Sensei rolled his eye and pried almost empty bottle out of Asuma-san's fingers. "Sakura found what's left of it. The important part is gone."

"So you need me to get it from Konohamaru? If he is really involved, that is." The man still seemed reluctant to believe them, but he looked like he passed the stage of denial and was closing to
acceptance. Kakashi-sensei must have felt it too and relaxed a fraction.

"I need you to be a concerned member of the clan that won't sell him and a hypothetical Senju out. We'll do the rest."

"Ohh, Kakashi, treason?" Asuma-san asked mock-blithely, his voice rich with sarcasm. "Never thought you were the kind."

The men stared flatly at each other and Kakashi-sensei's hand was posed like he was ready to swing the bottle at the closest wall. "Don't make me give you a concussion and drag you through half the district to Anko's to make you forget everything you've seen and heard today. Asuma, I'm trusting you with more than just my life. "His eye darted to Sakura and the boys. "We don't have time for your monkey business. Yes or no?"

"Come on, man! If there's really a Senju in the village it's a damn blessing. With mokuton to boot! Why shouldn't Council-"

"Wow, that was a ve-ery wrong thing to say~"

Kakashi-sensei froze in his place like he's been struck by lightning and the visible part of his face went through a very conflicting series of emotions. Sakura found she really wanted to just wrap her teammates in a thick layer of cotton wool and disappear for some tropical retreat on Trepang Isle. Dad said it was an ideal place for a winter vacation. Unfortunately, that was not an option and instead of imagining the four of them soaking in the warm waters of the Sea of Thieves Sakura watched sensei's face rearrange into a fierce scowl under his mask.

"Not when I can stop it. Not at the expense of children's lives."

That absolutely was something very personal. And unpleasant.

"Oh." Asuma-san pushed the base of his palm into the bridge of his nose, hardly hiding a pained expression. "I'm sorry, Kakashi, I forgot about-"

"Will you help?" sensei interrupted him tiredly, clearly at the end of his rope.

"Alright, I'll be whatever you need me to be."

Konohamaru knew they were busted when Naruto-niichan's clone hunted him down and said his uncle had invited him, Udon and Moegi-chan over. Didn't need to be a genius to figure it out, not with the way how Sarutobi Clan worked.

An Esteemed Grandson to the outsiders, he hardly meant anything in the oppressive silence of the old walls of the estate. People here didn't live, they existed like beautiful dolls on a display and nothing could shake them out of the endless circle of noble duties. Routine reigned there long before Konohamaru was even born, military precise and unforgiving with ANBU and their empty copies hiding in every nook and cranny. Sarutobi Clan wasn't really a place for young children and, truth be told, there weren't many.

Maybe that was why Konohamaru had gotten used to relying on himself from a very young age. His aunts had their own kids to babysit and care for, his mom he didn't remember at all and his father was... He was, that being the best description. Hokage-sama hardly ever showed up in his life and even if he did it was mostly to chastise him for yet another prank. Konohamaru wasn't picky about the reasons for his attention back in the years, but when Jishin Dōmei began pushing Fire borders in
the west, the man he had used to call jiji disappeared from the estate completely and what was sitting in his stead in the Hokage Tower was not his jiji at all.

Konohamaru had friends in Academy by then, so wherever he felt alone back at the house he lived in, Moegi-chan's family was okay with him sticking around and Udon's mom kind of implied he could use a spare futon any time he needed a place to crash. Worst case scenario, he could hunt Naruto-niichan or go bother Iruka-sensei. Anything was better than being shooed away by his aunts or silence of his father's dark room.

Uncle Asuma had been a foreign concept and nothing but a rumor for so long, the first meeting with him went a little like this: Konohamaru was sneaking out, as usual, creeping on tiptoes by father's room not to wake him or an iryō-nin on duty, when he heard a male voice inside. Moegi-chan and Udon were probably already waiting for him at Yūsaki Shrine because Moegi's cousin had just turned three and her step-mom Kyōmei-san invited him to attend Shichi-Go-San together.

But his father never had guests.

Curiosity won, of course, and he tried to slither closer to half-opened shoji to take a peek at the newcomer only to find himself caught by the cape with feet dangling in the air. It wasn't probably the best first impression. But in the end, Uncle Asuma turned out to be the same as any other adult in the Clan - he glorified Konohamaru's father' actions and paid no afternoon to the lowlifes. They hadn't really talked since.

No matter how Konohamaru looked at it, the only reason the jōnin could take any sudden interest in him and his friends was their little adventure in Takara. They've kept their mouths shut about it, never even spoke about it again, so how had he found out?

Naruto-niichan's clone that hunted him and his friends down was friendly and chatty like nothing was off as he led them through the village and into the Shadow, but if Konohamaru could, he'd run. Take Moegi and Udon and run as far as his feet could carry them. He'd heard what happened to traitors.

While he tried to catch his racing thoughts they came to a stop in front of a nondescript apartment building, one of its many lookalikes here in Shadow District. There was only one way - forward. Appearances could be misleading and while he looked like an idiot most of the time, Konohamaru had some brains in that thick skull of his. He'd take the blame when the time comes.

He squared his shoulders and opened the door.

"A-ah, you're so cute!" Girl's rich violet eyes lit up like summer fireworks when her gaze landed on standing in front of the 'welcoming committee' Sakura. "I'm Moegi, nice to meet you!"

"Hello, I'm Naruto's teammate, Sakura, and this is Sasuke and our sensei, Hatake Kakashi." She smiled her prettiest smile that made people's hearts melt and bowed, not there's-Hokage's-grandson-in-front-of-me but rather a friend-of-a-friend type of bow. It scored her a brownie point with Konohamaru, who stopped staring her up suspiciously and darted past her to hang on real Naruto's neck like a big blue-caped monkey.

"Hey, nii-chan! What's the big deal? We were goin' to prank Iruka-sensei real smart today! Moe-chan got us paint and bru- oof!"

He was silenced midword by a suffocating tug on the cape from the third visitor, an unsettlingly
unremarkable kid hiding behind thick glasses. "You've just busted us, Kono." He wiped his runny nose with a pristine white handkerchief, folded it neatly before putting it in the pocket and only then met Sakura's eyes with a brief but polite nod, "Udon. Nice to meet you, Sakura-san."

That reminds me…~ Inner snorted, not so subtly pushing a memory of Academy times to the surface of their shared mindscape.

Yeah, a hyper, a nerd and an actual nice person. That just screams Naruto, me and Sasuke back when everything was alright.

Oh? I thought of Kiba, Shino, and Hinata?~

Or Ino, Shikamaru, and Chōji… Another team in the making, huh?

While she and Inner bickered, Sakura ushered the newcomers into the living room where Asuma-san was busy clearing the cigarette smoke in a poor attempt of hospitality. He waved hello to the kids, a bit awkwardly to Sakura’s taste, but Konohamaru ignored him just how he did with Kakashi-sensei. The boy seemed to have an opinion on adults. Sakura shrugged it off and did her best to engage in a light conversation with Moegi and Udon as she herded them towards a rickety couch. Sasuke, clearly unrecognized by the kids, jumped on the chance to get away from the chatter and took a vantage point by the window, leaving Naruto to deal with an excited Sarutobi heir. Sakura didn't blame him.

This post-massacre Sasuke wasn’t a sweet smiley boy she had once known. There were days when he perceived even the slightest human interaction as a grave offense like talking could physically hurt him. At these times the pretense of leaving him alone was their best shot and Sakura had no qualms about letting him be as long as he stayed in their line of sight.

Fun watching Naruto lecture Konohamaru on subtlety might be, but Inner didn't let Sakura forget about their mission. Both of them were studying two remaining kids, looking for definite clues and a way to breach the matter of the stolen scroll without spooking them.

Could it be Udon? Sakura wondered. Dark hair, dark eyes, slim build - he fits the Senju exterior.

Udon seemed more levelheaded and, therefore, more likely to listen to the voice of reason. Moegi turned out to be a nice, polite girl, maybe a little too talkative, but nowhere close to beating Naruto when he was on a roll. Nudged in the right direction, she seemed to be the one to spill all the beans.

Nah, Inner chuckled amusedly, the noodle kid’s not It. A hundred ryo on the girl. Remember our genetics paper?~

Sakura perked up.

Moegi? Why? Wait! Genetics? Genotype and phenotype. Observable traits. Pale skin - check. Bright orange hair - nope, all Senju we’ve ever seen in books were either brunettes or blondes. Violet eyes - nah, too rare in Fire, that's a dominant trait in water-based nations…

An evasive thought was itching at the back of Sakura's mind, not exactly a memory but she was sure she’d seen this exact combination before, just not in Konoha. But she had never been to other places too, which left books and… an official portrait of the Shodai and his wife, Mito-sama, in the history class.

Sakura threw a sideways glance at her sensei only to meet his grey eye staring at her. His brow arched a fraction in reply when he saw her dumbstruck expression, but he nodded. The resemblance was unmistakable.
Inoichi was balancing on the hind legs of his chair as he read sixth for this evening report on suspicious activity in Esaba-machi. The biggest eastern port of Fire Country lured spies, criminals and other dregs of society like honey, but shinobi personnel stationed there also wasn’t made of green genin, they knew their job. Lately, however, Konoha’s network was buzzing with some very contradictory intel regarding shadow dealings on Musei peninsula; the only thing the informants agreed on was that Land of Waves had been... making waves, damn Jiraiya-sama and his love for puns.

Wave crime lords usually died so fast most people didn’t even bother remembering their names anymore. These rumors, however… Gato’s reputation painted him greedier than his last eight predecessors that had chosen to limit their operations to the small archipelago. No, he started by sucking it up to Kiri - there was no other explanation to how swift his ascension went - and now he was sticking his nose into the Land of Bones, putting Fire Country trade in the region at risk.

Inoichi looked up at a huge map covering almost the whole wall to his left and bit his lip.

Sugar Cane, Silk, and smaller lands didn’t have their own merchant ships - Sea of Thieves in the west was riddled with pirates and Dancing Sea in the east would crush whole fleets in whirlpools if not for the old Uzu maps Konoha had saved and Kiri stole during the war. All caravans that had used to pass directly into Fire via the ford appearing every full moon, now, after the collapse of the direct trade route through the Sound, were stopped by mountain range that cut the Musei peninsula from the mainland.

Inoichi understood the need to protect the territory from intruders, but it didn’t mean he was happy with the means Sannin had chosen to do so. They certainly had forgotten to consider all the consequences their actions could have for the region's economy. It took Konoha quite some time to adjust to the new conditions and by then Land of Bones, closest to Fire’s main port Esaba and the sole remaining source of the bonewood ships that could survive the whirlpools, turned into the main
trade hub in the Dancing Sea. Sugar and spice, silk and salt from Musei peninsula now entered Fire through Esaba customs where Trade Union picked it up and distributed everywhere from the Land of Rivers to enjoying their status of a tourist attraction Yu. All in all, Fire still controlled the trade in the region and Konoha all but held a monopoly on caravan and ship protection.

Yet something about this new Wave crime lord seemed off.

Till now Inoichi's people were sure Gato had some sort of a deal with Water Country, the latest rumors, however, spoke about a group of Kiri nukenin guarding one of his newly acquired bonewood frigate that was spotted near Esaba docks. One of said nukenin had a very particular sword... Inoichi flung his tail from one shoulder to the other and underlined an uneven string of symbols on the salt-stained parchment. Jiraiya-sama definitely needed to read this.

A warm tingle of Ino's thoughts at the back of his mind took him by surprise. She usually preferred to come by his office to talk in person since her relationship with Sakura had been put on hold and Shikamaru kept walking a tightrope. He was about to answer her call when the door to his office opened, letting a familiar face in. The face he didn't plan to see for a couple of days at least: he had sent her home to sleep the exhaustion off himself. The problem was, Teri looked like she was working through the night yet again, adding more unhealthy color to the bags under her eyes. Through all these years they'd worked together Inoichi came to know she would never pass on the possibility of a good old eight-hour slumber so his alarm immediately went off like crazy.

With a sigh, he put the report away and gestured for her to sit in a guest chair. Unlike the atrocities in the interrogation cells, this one was actually a nice piece of furniture aimed to relax the person using it rather than make them squirm uncontrollably in a fruitless attempt to find somewhat bearable position.

"You look even worse than yesterday, Teri-kun."

She frowned at her nails, picking at a cobalt ninja polish. "Har-har, taichō. I bear bad news."

"When didn't you... I'm all ears."

"I've spoken to Kakashi. He brought his lot to my place today. Kids progress faster than we thought." She spoke in short, clipped sentences like her brain would shut off and she'd fall asleep at any moment. "I gave them some insight into what's going on and contacted the Sage."

Inoichi frowned at her, "That wasn't in plans for at least two months."

"Monkey whistle issue turned out to be more pressing than I thought yesterday. Anko's going to be here soon, I'd rather not repeat it all twice." She sank deeper into the chair and threw her head back to look at the muddy off-white ceiling. "I'm not sure I did the right thing."

Inoichi frowned at her, "That wasn't in plans for at least two months."

That was... unexpected. For all the restraint she had built up over the years, Teri's mulish conviction to the choices she had made was well-known. Right or wrong, it was already done, an unchangeable history and therefore not worthy of dwelling on it. Mistakes were to be analyzed, failures to be learned from, but emotional assessment was never her forte.

Inoichi stood up, fighting the desire to pace, perched on the edge of his deck so he could still see her eyes and inquired neutrally, "A little late for that realization, isn't it?"

"I'm not talking about Kakashi and his kids. That was the only feasible choice at the moment."

Somehow Inoichi was sure it was not. It might be the choice she wanted to make though, for reasons known only to Teri herself. Damn Nara and their twisted brains that needed a minder on the best of
days. Why had Shikaku agreed to let her stay off-clan and without an official rite of passage? If she at least had her beacon…

“When is Dōjin to be back?”

The woman snorted, “Cut it, taichō. My blood is diluted enough, I don’t need a man to keep my mind clear.”

“Then what this is all about?”

“Remember the purple scroll you’ve got me back when I was sixteen?”

He drummed his fingers on the polished surface of the table as he shuffled through the memories. “That Kitsuke kid? Ōren, I reckon? He was clean, Teri, his family had passed all the checks so there was no reason for you to go through and marry him. Or-” he wiggled his eyebrows at her knowingly, “…have you reconsidered?”

She tried to kick him in the shin, but he dodged it easily, so she just rolled her eyes. “No, still don’t feel like taking a leaf out of my daddy’s book and screwing around, if that’s what you’re asking. I just… Something about this whole mess doesn’t sit right with me. He was-”

“Oi, what’s with the faces?” Anko waltzed into the room, unannounced as always, with a wide smile around a dango skewer sticking out of her mouth. “Nee-chan, I’ve got what you’ve asked for! You owe me two thousand ryo though.” She dropped a thin folder marked /Student Personal File | Academy Staff Use Only/ onto the desk and made a grabby motion at Teri.

The chūnin groaned but fished a couple of bills out of her weapons pouch and handed it over. “Couldn’t you sneak by Iruka-kun on your own? Was dragging Kurenai-san along that necessary?”

“You made me get out of a warm comfy bed and leave my cuddly girlfriend alone. I needed my reconciliatory prize and what’s better than a specialty Habutae dango shared with someone who can appreciate it?” Anko victoriously stabbed Teri in the shoulder with the skewer. “So, what’s the fuss about?”

Inoichi preferred to ignore their banter for the sake of his sanity, picked up the folder and opened it, reading the short dossier out loud.

"Kazamatsuri Moegi, born June 8th, 2010 to a woman named Karen. The last name is unknown. Father's name is unknown. Adopted into Kazamatsuri Clan by Kazamatsuri Kyōmei in 2015 after her mother went MIA on a patrol mission."

Inoichi knew the Head of the Clan, Kyōmei, to some extent. She was the head for Ranman Constructions and a regular contractor of Yamanaka Flowers when it came to the gentrification of their sites. Other than that? Moegi didn't ring any bells for him. Civilians…

Teri raked her fingers through the braid curling around her head, causing some metal studs holding it in place to dislodge. Graying hair fell over her face like a curtain. She blew it away and glowered at her feet, "Kakashi and his kids did some digging and I went to talk to my grandmother shortly after to prove their theory. This girl's mother's full name has to be Oya Karen, the daughter Oya Imiko who, supposedly, was one of the underage conquests of Senju Kurama. Shime-baa was working as a seamstress to Oya Clan back then, she said there was a huge scandal when Imiko got a bun in the oven. She miscarried from all the pressure about twenty-nine weeks in. End of story, officially at least."

Anko grimaced, "Those fucking noble assholes… Inoichi, no offense."
He waved it off. If anyone had a right to be pissed, it was Anko. The way her mother's Clan all but denied her existence after Orochimaru disaster certainly had left a bitter taste. He turned back to Teri, "So, Ōbane-san told you an unofficial version?"

The chūnin nodded distastefully, "Oya lied about the dates. She gave birth to a girl, got to hold her for about fifteen minutes and name her Karen, then the midwife took the child away. She ended up in the orphanage, then in the Academy. Climbed the ranks, got wounded on border patrol in the late '00s and was relieved off duty. Kazamatsuri hired her as a woodworker, soon after she gave birth to a girl. The father - a merchant from Rivers - was never in the picture. Everything else is in the file."

"Your grandmother was thorough."

Teri threw a sideway glance at Anko and murmured, "She was there when it happened and felt responsible for how it went down. Senju Kurama wasn't an honest man by any account. Even Founder's Clan had some bad eggs but we all know how history is written.

Inoichi pursed his lips, preferring to keep his thoughts to himself. When his father was preparing to retire and hand the title of the Clan Head over, they visited a particular sealed-off section of Clan library. There, in a badly lit room on the old bookshelves labeled with almost every big clan name dirty secrets were being collected and safely kept away from the public eye. Inoichi got sick more than once as his father guided him through the darkest parts of Yamanaka history. It took him years to desensitize to the crimes hidden there, much longer in fact then it took one of his own twice removed cousins to have their name put on one of the scrolls. Bad blood seemed to run deep in the old clans.

He pushed the papers in the file around, trying to remember the face of Tsunade-sama's wayward uncle, but the man could as well get himself killed well before Inoichi was even born. Senju hadn't fared well when it came to life expectancy. Absently he went through the Academy grade list, medical assessment forms, adoption certificate, a photo… He'd probably seen her in the crowd and thought nothing of it, Konoha was home to many people with water nations' roots, but all he could see now was Tsunade-sama's bone structure and the coloring of Sannin's grandmother.

"Right under our noses all this time! How could we let her slip through the cracks?"

Teri got out of the chair (with a fair amount of Anko's help) and placed another photo next to the square piece of paper holding the image of Kazamatsuri Moegi. Her younger self stood in front of a small house next to the family of four - all with auburn hair and muddy blue eyes. Her voice was raspy when she spoke, "We thought Kitsuke had connections to Ame, but they were clean. What if we suspected west when we should've looked east? What if there’s more of the old blood left?"

Their eyes met, and he shook his head, recognizing her implication, yet not ready to accept her solution. "We can't just start randomly digging in the past of every Konoha redhead now, Teri. We have more pressing matters to attend. Let it go."

Unexpectedly, Anko chose his side. "I know you promised, nee-chan," she said with unusual for her sobriety, "we all did. But we have to remember the main goal. We still need to make sure Konoha is in good hands."

They all avoided saying it out loud for gods know how long. Greater good. So pathetic… Sometimes Inoichi wondered if Danzō justified his doings with these same two words. This whole Sannin no San'ekiyu seemed mostly harmless now when they still stuck to collecting intel, but soon—

No. First, they end the war.
Teri sighed, admitting her defeat. "Anyways, right now we have a girl with Senju blood and their scroll. I have sent a message to Orochimaru-sama since Tsunade-sama wasn’t responding. He'll be waiting for summons from Anko."

She procured a clearly custom-made scroll from her pouch and handed it over to already back to her obnoxious self Mitarashi. "It had been ripped in two parts, but Team Seven had managed to retrieve both. Moegi is under Kakashi's surveillance until we get a word from Sound. Sarutobi Konohamaru and Ise Udon - girl's self-assigned teammates - are aware of her status and I strongly advise action before someone slips and we have another Araigawa. Sarutobi Asuma has agreed watching over them for now."

Anko hid the scroll in her cleavage and smiled toothily, "Taichō trusts him with life and Kurenai-chan does too. I think we can use him. What's bad in having our man among the monkeys?"

"Could as well try. Anko, these are for Jiraiya-sama," Inoichi handed the reports he was reading half an hour ago over to her. "If there's any news, come directly to me, I don't care for the hour. And you," he glared at silently nodding off Teri, "are going to go home and get some goddamn sleep. No more meetings and wild chases, I don't want you do go crazy on us before your husband gets back. Now shoo!"

As soon as his door closed after Anko carrying Teri over her shoulder like a sack of rice, he untied his ponytail and finally fell back into his chair. A couple of minutes of meditation cleared his mind and he answered an excited hum of his daughter's thoughts, "What's up, Princess?"

"Hey, dad, took you long enough!"

He could feel her laughter rippling along their connection. Her early initiation used to trouble him - seven was way too young age to be exposed to the mire of people's minds, but Ino came through with it. Her grandfather was right, she'd be a good Clan Head one day. It was a shame he didn't live to see her grow up.

"I'm sorry, Princess, duty was calling. So, what made you so happy?"

"I'm going to stay at Shika's today," she announced haughtily, but immediately broke into another fit of giggles, "He's been dancing around Hinata all day and she's coming with us now. I think he's going to come clean today and wants to use her as a shield, the dumbass!"

"Be nice," Inoichi chided her half-heartedly, "and behave."

Most of his mind was already busy planning a celebratory getaway though. He needed to send a runner to Chōza so he and Yūmi were ready for an impromptu Saturday invasion of old friends, drop by the flower shop to tell Suzume they're going out and, of course, congratulate Shikaku on his son finally owning up to his bullshit. Oh, Yoshino would totally have a field day with the boy once Ino was through with him and the dust settled.

"So the house is ours for the night?" Ino inquired innocently. He snorted out loud. That's his girl...

"I'll take care of that, Princess, just promise me there will be no property damage and you three won't traumatize Hinata-san any further."

"Pinky promise, daddy! Say hi to aunt Yūmi from me!"

The bright touch of his daughter's thoughts melted into a muddy sea of Konoha's mental plane, but Inoichi wasn't about to give in to its glum. Sleep would neutralize Teri's overly dutiful ass for at least fifteen hours, Anko would deal with Sannin, Team Seven was finally on the right track - he could let
himself one happy stressless evening. Family first, wars would have to wait.

Chapter End Notes

The beginning of this chapter haunted me since the beginning of summer and I had my moments where I just wanted to scrap it all and get on with life. So instead of going in circles I began making maps for the verse, one - of the world, click for full size - you can see in this chapter. Another one - of Konoha - will be posted in one of the following chapters when I figure a couple of empty spaces.
Thanks to everyone still sticking with this story and I'll see you in the next chapter,
Love, Kay <3
are you hurting the ones you love?

Chapter Summary

and was it something you could not stop

Chapter Notes

The song for this chapter is Are You Hurting The One You Love? by Florence + The Machine

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Academy of Konoha had by no means ever been as internationally notorious as the one of Kiri or as shrouded in secrecy as Suna's. In the public eye, it was hardly more than a weird prestigious school nested at the base of the Hokage Mountain, that could give one's child a proper, well-rounded education. No disastrous incidents, no ritual deaths on the school grounds as well as a variety of subjects offered - from calligraphy and elaborate range of etiquette and culture-oriented ones (mostly taken by girls) to chemistry and physics - made most parents turn a blind eye on the amount of the so-called physical education.

Civilians were ready to pay hefty sums of money to get their kids enrolled. They were more than aware that their offsprings would never have the resolve, talent or chakra control to get through the grindstones of shinobi part of the curriculum and actually take the Shinobi Graduation Exam. And, truth be told, most of them didn't.

By the end of the first grade, filled with intensive physical training and learning the ropes of the shinobi code, about half of the students usually quit in favor of the civilian track. There was nothing wrong with preferring to concentrate on the subjects that could get them a good place in life without putting it in danger.

One-third of those, who chose to remain and weren't carefully weeded out by the staff by the time Graduation Exam came round, simply opted not to take the Exam at all and went on their merry ways with certificates that would guarantee them easy acceptance for Mastery or to other schools. Of those who had stayed though…

Iruka sighed, shuffling through thin folders of the summer graduation batch's personal files. Only twenty-one students... Hmm, nowhere as big as January class. That one ended up with forty-five graduates, twelve of them approved for full-time teams and the rest assigned to Genin Corps. Well, let's see...

Partly it had to do with an unusually high number of clan kids in that January class. Most were carefully pushed to their limits so they could receive their hitaiate and get a placement on the team the Council wanted them on. Village-funded orphans worked hard too. Every semester they took only furthered their debt and Iruka could relate to their desire to get out of the Academy and the system as soon as possible. And then there was Naruto.
The boy was bright for sure, but in his own unique way that could hardly be measured by standard testing. Like Lee-san from last year’s graduation batch, he needed a special approach and just like the older boy Naruto would be stuck in the Academy for much longer if not for a small miracle. He had applied for graduation two times already but failed spectacularly. He’d have failed this time too if not for Mizuki losing his marbles. For once, the luck turned out to be in Naruto’s favor.

*How is he doing now?* Iruka wondered, worrying his lip. The boy wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed in terms of academics, but he had an unconventional mind. *Surely, being a student of such a renowned shinobi as Hatake-san would open some doors for him despite the… thing.*

A shiver ran down his spine as the memories began to resurface and the chūnin frowned, willing his body to stay relaxed. He could feel other teachers in the staff room squint at him suspiciously, looking for any sign of treachery even though he’d poured his very soul into doing his best for the Academy and his charges. *Thanks, Mizuki.* Iruka had never even been out of the country, only left Konoha a dozen times with his genin team and they still suspected him of being a spy! Disheartening as it was, he had no desire to give Director Kishima more reasons to look down on him, so he just fished Kanda twins’ files out of the pile and dove into reading with another sigh, completely ignoring Yashida-sensei’s heavy glare boring holes in his back.

*What do we have here?*

The girls’ father was a shinobi, but only the first of his family, so there was no clan funding he could apply for. Six years ago it had left him with two choices: to pay for their education in full (which as a single father he had been unable to do) or sign Akiko and Yukiko up for a student loan they would be required to work off after graduation. Kanda-san had opted for the second one, essentially leaving the twins with no choice but to become genin in the shortest amount of time possible. The girls did well though, and Iruka was sure they would pass their Exam in July and most likely even get onto a jōnin-led team.

He smiled tiredly to himself as his thoughts did a full circle and Naruto’s cheerful voice from the moment he had given the boy his hitaiate echoed in his mind. *I just hope he’s doing his best and Sakura and Sasuke don’t treat him too poorly.*

"I-ru-ka~ I’m bo-o-ored!"

The wail from the window on the other side of the room didn’t make him flinch. It totally didn’t. He knew she was coming well before her feet touched the Academy grounds.

He turned around to face grinning toothily around a dango skewer Anko, ignoring yet another pointed glare from Yashida-sensei. *Anko-neesan. What brings you here again?"

"Gods, Iruka, how can you sit in here all day?" she groaned, rolling her eyes. Her body was balanced on the windowsill at a very improbable angle as she surveyed the room. The results must have been not up to her expectations. *Folks from T&I have more action than you!"

"Teaching can be quite enough, thank you very much."

The woman huffed and spit the skewer out in exasperation. The whistling of air grated on Iruka’s sensitive ears as a wooden needle soared through the room and lodged itself between Director’s decree on the use of blunt shuriken and new grading policy guidelines on the nearest wall. Most of the teachers were looking at her now, but Anko wouldn’t be herself if she gave a damn about their opinions.

She leaped over Sanada-sensei’s table and crossed the staff room in five long strides, flashing way
beyond acceptable for an educational institution amount of flesh as the flaps of her trenchcoat swung open. At least three relatively young TAs dropped whatever they were doing, staring at her in wonder and pure lust. When she came to a halt in front of his table, Iruka was beet red and sputtering. He was very consciously trying to look anywhere but forward where only a skimpy fishnet prevented him from getting an eyeful of Anko's boobs.

"Pru-u-ude!" she leered at him good-naturedly. He stubbornly refused to look at her.

Wham!

Iruka jumped slightly when she thumped her hands on his table and sent his files flying, "Anko!"

She peered at him from above for a brief moment, then her grin suddenly turned into a pout and she whined petulantly, "You're boring! This place kills my will to live! I'm gonna go hunt!"

She disappeared with a nauseating crackle, only a couple of maple leaves dangling in the air before they too dissolved in a puff of chakra as shunshin trace vanished. For a minute the staff room was completely silent, then Iruka heard Sanada-sensei chuckle, "Poor centipedes…"

It seemed to break the spell and other TAs rushed to their spots, busy with their clumsy attempts to make sure no one could see their raging hard-ons. Nothing new, at least when Anko and her flashy visits were concerned.

"I was boring an hour and a half ago, what could have changed," Iruka mumbled, shaking his head as he tried to get his files back into order.

Wait. What Kazamatsuri's file is doing here? Didn't I finish the second grade just after Anko left the first time?

His eyes darted to a tall pile of manila folders on his left. The sticker on the one labeled Class 2-C stated 'processed'.

"Ahem. Are you quite finished, Iruka-san?" Yashida-sensei grouched. His wrinkled face was contorted in a standoffish grimace. "People are trying to work here and your friends keep-"

"My apologies," the chūnin murmured quietly in response and ducked his head. He quickly flipped through Kazamatsuri's file to check if he had already filed her latest grades into the report before pushing it into her class' folder and getting back to the graduation class.

Anko was acting weird today, but then again she had always been weird and that was exactly how Iruka liked his big sister.

While Konoha orphans had no choice but to join the program and serve the village that fed and clothed them; while civilian kids indulged the first seeds of a teenage drama over whether they should just drop the shinobi courses and be done with it or keep studying to ogle their cute year mates and preen in front of the quitters; heirs of noble shinobi clans lived in an entirely different world. Big names, seemingly carrying them through the Academy's worst, often only added insult to injury, especially when 'a Nara lazybones' continued to pass every test in spite of sleeping the classes away, or Akimichi and Aburame still got positive grades in P.E. regardless of their inability to run a five-kilometer track without collapsing at least twice. Clan children were regarded as royalty of shinobi world, envied by many, but only their closest friends knew the ugly truth: none of them had a model childhood. They rarely had a childhood at all.
Chōji-san was brought up by a loving family of people with a calm and polite demeanor and an ability to regard almost anything as food or at least a cooking ingredient. They hardly ever made any enemies and he too was nice to anyone, even to the bullies that had chosen him as a favorite target. Not many people could see through the walls good enough to know what happened when he had used to excuse himself from the class after the lunch break or why his papa constantly fussed about him not gaining enough weight so close to his initiation.

Ino-san had lost most of her friends by the age of eight because they kept smiling in her face and thought gross things of her at the same time. She quickly learned to hide that pinched expression when people were particularly rude and had built Sasuke-san's fan club instead. Sakura-san seemed the only one to stay true to their friendship, but even she had chosen an unfounded rivalry over Ino-san a year ago.

Shikamaru, the boy Iruka-sensei often claimed to be the smartest of their generation, had managed to make a mess of his team even before he and his closest friends were one. All because he had seen what would be asked of them and he did not trust himself to be able to protect them.

And Hinata… there hadn't been a day when she wasn't ashamed of herself.

She was born sick, allergic to lightning chakra already coursing through her frail body. Living in spite of the weakness she carried since infancy became an instinct as years went, not that it would ever matter to the Clan, Elders or her Father. *Hyūga welcome the pain. Pain brings greatness.*

She had been abducted, cornered into killing a man well before she knew how to hold a kunai and eight years later she still regretted his death even though she knew what Kumo would do to her given the chance. Hinata hated herself for it. Only once she had made a mistake of confiding in her Mother to simply be turned away again with yet another Clan motto. *Hyūga don't regret necessary deaths.* It was a lie all along because her Mother had always loved Uncle Hizashi more than Father.

Neji-niisan had not forgiven her for the words she had said shortly after Uncle Hizashi’s death but Hinata could not blame him. They both were so young and consumed by grief, it was no wonder he easily fell prey to Grandfather’s teachings of Fate. Then he was marked by the Caged Bird Seal.

Still, even now, when his vision was clouded by hate, Neji-niisan trained relentlessly to grow stronger.

Even their younger sister had been forced to leave her *childish* dreams behind two years ago. *Hyūga do not dream. Hyūga take what's theirs, all else is fickle.* Always in the shadow of Hinata’s unwanted fame and Neji’s genius, Hanabi was fighting viciously to prove her worth. Hinata knew she was clinging to the ties that were unraveling in her grasp and it pained her to see how her little sister slowly bent under the pressure.

Hinata was born into the noblest clan of Konoha, *fated* to see to its prosperity. Pupilless eyes followed her everywhere, watching as she pushed her body to the limit to appease Father and take some pressure off her sister. Shaken and unsteady, she tried to become the heir the Clan wanted her to be. Her own dreams of peace and healing were nothing more than grains of sand slipping through her fingers. She had taken to stay silent throughout official ceremonies, meals and other ordeals until it became her nature; but there was no hiding from her own *faulty mind*.

*Hyūga Clan was no place for gentleness, no home for love and there was nothing else she yearned for more.*

"-nata-san, are you hungry? I've made okonomiyaki."
The girl flinched as her attention snapped away from bickering in the yard Shikamaru and Ino-san. She blinked, willing byakugan to deactivate and turned towards the sound of Chōji-san's voice. He was leaning on one of the engawa beams, studying her with a faint smile and looking completely at ease in the Nara Clan Head house. And happier.

"They're going to be like this for a while," he said with wry amusement as his teammates' heated argument slowly devolved into a shouting match. "Ino was at the end of her rope already. Two-three more days and she'd beat a confession out of him."

"Shikamaru didn't want to hurt you." Hinata unconsciously hugged her knees closer and averted her eyes. She was aware that most people were unnerved by the empty stare and what it implied.

Chōji sighed and took off a bright purple apron before sitting down on her left with grace not many knew he possessed. He dangled his bare feet above the ground, carefully wording what he wanted to say. "He… I know, Hinata-san, and Ino does too. It's a lesson for us both as much as it is for him. We trusted him to trust us."

"And he almost failed."

"As did we. You helped Shika to remember we're always here for him even though you didn't have to." Chōji-san chewed on his lip, then chuckled and scooted over until their shoulders bumped together. "Thanks."

Hinata was tempted to hide her face and pretend she wasn't there, but Chōji-san seemed awfully sincere and she didn't want to be rude. With a soft huff, she put her chin on a bent knee instead and blew the bangs away from her eyes, looking straight ahead where the sky was already slipping into the evening darkness and a nearly perfect circle of the rising moon was painting Nara forest behind the fence in blues. It was… peaceful even though Ino-san continued yelling on top of her lungs about stupidity and self-assuredness. Hinata knew she should feel like an intruder but somehow she wasn't.

"I'm… glad I could help," she murmured softly.

Then Ino-san caught Shikamaru in a headlock and hurled him through the yard like a rag doll with an ear-piercing screech that tore through the air, spooking nesting in the forest birds into flight. He landed on Hinata's right, stuck to the polished wood of engawa with chakra charged soles of his feet, and wheezed, "Help?"

"I think I might have left the gas on. Hinata-san, do you mind checking on the stove for me?" Chōji-san asked suddenly and she found herself nodding in agreement. She had done what she could for Team Ten but now it was time for them to work their issues out without her.

"I promise I will fix you before dinner. All of you." She disappeared into the house as Chōji-san grabbed Shikamaru unceremoniously and marched towards waiting for them Ino-san.

"For a genius you're pretty thick, Shika. What part of the word teamwork went over your head?" she heard the older boy rumble in the distance and it made her lips curl in a gentle smile. She tied on left in her care apron and went to explore an unfamiliar kitchen to the cacophony of battle cries and half-hearted pleas for mercy.

“My brain hu-urt.”

“At least it means you have some.”
“Hey, what?”

“Or not…”

“You-”

“Boys, not again!” Sakura groaned desperately. She was so damn tired of this endless day and their bickering wasn’t helping. The only thing that still made her bruised after five hours of grueling combat training feet move forward was Inner.

*I can't concentrate when they screech in our ears, long face~*  
And even she sounded subdued.

Naruto opened his mouth to protest, but Sakura would have none of it, at least not until they all were in the relative safety of her or sensei's home. Knowledge settled into a heavyweight on her shoulders and she wasn't so sure she was ready for *so much of it*. She really wanted to talk about what had happened, draw a timeline, make some lists - anything to just understand how her team had ended up in the midst of the clusterfuck that Konoha politics turned out to be. But most of all, Sakura wanted to sleep.

*Just hope mom won't be too pissed~* Inner chuckled despite their combined exhaustion, catching on the inklings of Sakura's plan.

*She'll love it, Sakura countered, you just wait.* She cast a wary look around, checking for way too curious for their own good passers-by, grabbed both boys by the collars and purposefully stomped in the direction of Nidai Kōen, leaving the Kakashi-sensei to catch up.

Closed gates of small family homes and dimly lit entrances of tea shops turned into a blur. They crossed Tea and entered Yakai district in near silence because Naruto wouldn't try to argue when he was so close to suffocation by his own jacket, Sasuke clearly decided to surrender to his fate for the time being and Kakashi-sensei found them all amusing judging by the snorts the wind carried over.

They traveled like this for half an hour, spooking the drunks back into izakaya and collecting laughs from fellow shinobi slinking in the shadows. Most of them were laughing at Kakashi-sensei, Sakura figured, for many chūnin viewed his appointment as a genin sensei as a demotion.

*They don't know a tenth of it~* Inner barked maliciously and Sakura didn't have it in her to disagree. She was dragging her resigned to their fate teammates by outskirts of Yamanaka Estate and, even though it's been a while since she last spoke with Ino, Sakura was still unconsciously looking out for her.

*They probably don't. Wait, look!*

The windows of Yamanaka Flowers were shuttered. The plate on the glass door read 'closed', a pretty unusual sight for barely past 8 pm. Ino's family tended to keep the shop open well into the night, catering to drunk husbands running late, shinobi returning from their missions and other nocturnal wanderers - one of the best sources of rumors in the village.

*Maybe she's with her team~* Inner offered gently. She missed Ino too.

*And her parents?* Sakura couldn't push the worry down. If the last week didn't make her paranoid, today totally did.

*At friends', Chōji's house probably. It's Saturday, long face! Come on, Naruto's trying to slither
Sakura absently changed the grip on both boys' collars and anxiously quickened her pace. They were passing Konoha's main square and all the people around seemed to stare at them. It made her heart rate spike and she wished they had taken the roofs instead of walking the streets.

Sensei's Pack must have sensed her budding fear and Ūhei was suddenly at her side, whining softly. Kakashi-sensei clicked his tongue chidingly as the dog nudged her thigh and the greyhound bolted ahead. Sakura watched him go only to notice the rest of the Pack except Guruko waiting for them in the alley. Even Shiba was there, which meant sensei's friend probably hadn't returned from his or her mission yet.

As soon as her feet touched the pavement of Nidai Kōen District, Sakura let the boys go. The area was completely civilian and therefore most of the inhabitants were already safely hidden from the biting winter wind within the walls of their homes, listening to the evening radio broadcast and not caring an inch about what happened in the neighborhood. It probably was okay to quit pretending. Sakura threw a quick glance at her sensei who simply stood in the middle of the road, surrounded by the dogs, and whispered, "Let's go home."

He raised a brow at her in question but when she caught Naruto's hand and motioned for Sasuke to follow, he too darted over the thick bushes lining the alley and together they disappeared into the night.

Something had changed.

Usually Mebuki was the first to leave the house, always busy with errands to run and customers to welcome. She wasn't Haruno by blood but she learned the art of trade from Kizashi and his family until she could proudly say she owned it. It took years and not a small number of little sacrifices, but Mebuki was stubborn. She was motivated by a constant reminder of her late mother, a small glimpse of the woman long gone that lived in her daughter's green eyes. She wanted to give Sakura everything and even though not all she had done worked out as planned, she knew she had done her best.

Usually, Mebuki was the early bird of Haruno residence, but today she had woken up to an empty house and a small note on Sakura's bed that simply read 'mission'. There was no gentle patter of feet on the stairs, no chiming laughter during breakfast, no hasty yet heartfelt good-byes at the threshold. Her girl had grown up and disappeared into the night like Mebuki's mother once did.

Somehow while she wasn't looking Sakura became

a shinobi.

An unreachable dream that had been thwarted by Mebuki's aliment became reality for her daughter. It stung a little. It filled her with hope. Maybe this generation would manage to right the world and free it from the grasp of never-ending war.

Mebuki was half-mindedly stirring the broth when a gentle rustle of the leaves in the yard alerted her to reality (she had never become a shinobi but she had lived her whole life in fear of being found out - the knew how to listen). She'd recognize her Sa-chan's steps anywhere, the boys' too since recently. The ladle came to rest on the counter and she went to open the door with a huge grin splitting her face.
"Just in time for dinner, I say. Go clean yourselves, now!" she tutted, looking smeared with mud trio.

"Hello, Mebuki-obaa- Hey!" Naruto was the first to barge in, propelled forward by Sa-chan's well-aimed push, and she had to lean on the nearest wall, laughing at the somersault Kushina's boy had to perform in the air to take off his caked with dirt sandals.

"Good evening," Sasuke followed suit but at a much reserved pace, "We apologize for the intrusion." He almost looked like he was ready for the door to be shut in his face.

That wouldn't do!

"Nonsense!" she already started to argue, but Sakura suddenly grabbed her into a one-armed hug from her less dirty side and whispered,

"I'm sorry for this mom, but it's so late and-

"Gods, child! What are you even talking about! Go grab spare futons from the storage and make sure you three are warm and clean! I'll call you when the food is ready." Mebuki corralled the trio into the house and, when their footsteps finally reached the top floor, turned around, crossing her hands on her chest, waiting.

Kakashi was standing at the very edge of the circle of light that poured out of the house with his dogs clinging to his feet. As soon as the kids disappeared from view, he hunched slightly, trying to keep the cold out of his flak jacket. He looked so lost and unsure in this moment, Mebuki realized, like the weight of the world was on his shoulders and the only thing making him still keep it together was the appearance he had to uphold.

In the end, it wasn't a hard decision to make.

"In," she ordered in her best mom voice that left no place for arguments. "The couch is yours and fluffs can take the carpet. Just make sure there are no pawprints on it."

The shape of his masked face changed as if he was going to object, but Naruto's horrified yelp "Sakura-chan, not the pants!" made them both chuckle and he raised his hands in surrender.

"Thank you for your hospitality," he murmured. "Boys…"

In fascination Mebuki watched the biggest dog dissolve in a plume of smoke, and the rest shake the drizzle and mud off their paws carefully before entering. Kakashi climbed the porch last and she just couldn't stop herself from grabbing his elbow and finally dragging him inside. He might be a devil on the battlefield and a monster in the shadows for all she cared, but he was also still a lost lonely boy.

"There's a change of clothes in the closet. The pants might be a little short, but I'm sure you can pull it off." She grinned, pushed sputtering Kakashi into a small bathroom and left for the kitchen, humming merrily to herself. People in Nidai Kōen loved to boast about how good it felt to have more than one child and Mebuki had always wanted a big family. So what if hers was a little different? She knew she already loved them all anyway and she was sure, Kizashi would too. The rest of the Harunos could go hang.
slides open, letting in a faint scent of tobacco and a blurry shadow. Silence settles.

In a small apartment on the southern edge of Tea District two boys roll out a spare futon and settle on it to plan the fifteenth attempt to cheat their way out of the upcoming tactics test. They don't see a pair of glinting with mischief eyes watching them from the gap in bay leaves across the street. A crumpled piece of navy fabric lays forgotten in the farthest corner of the room.

In the Kazamatsuri household a girl chatters happily to her stepmother, telling her a story about a young kunoichi with striking green eyes from the genin team she met today. Sometimes she casts a glance outside the window, wondering what the long-eared puppy does now. Is he okay out there? A thin spiral of a new seal itches behind her left ear and it makes her smile harder even though she doesn't feel like it.

In the center of the labyrinth of Hyūga Main Branch estate a girl makes the first step towards a tall figure waiting for her. Her lips are trembling, but her voice does not when she greets her father. *Fight*, he orders. *Save lives,* she wants to protest. The voice of her friend whispers, *Do both.* The memory of smiles and banter and warmth fill her and she deflects an attack. Byakugan messes up depth perception, but she is ready for it and, for the first time since this bizarre routine has settled, she gently lays her sister to sleep with a single precise strike to her neck, the one she can perform flawlessly. Her father nods and departs without a word. She lifts her little sister off the ground, unharmed and walks off to her room. There's a lot they have to talk about.

In the Nara forest a girl and two boys sit on top of the boulder in the middle of the lake. They throw pebbles into the water and count the ripples. None of them say a word yet they hold a conversation nonetheless, the one only three of them can hear. Their bond, strained and almost torn, strengthens.

In Haruno residence Naruto and Sasuke are finally tired of chasing happily barking Akino around the living room (including ceiling). They grab Sakura from the dogpile and head to her room, wishing Mebuki goodnight and each getting a hug on their way. Sasuke smiles as he slowly drifts off to sleep in an unfamiliar but homely, filled with the sounds of living space. Naruto twists and turns - it's too silent for him, no drunk fights, no noise of brothel down the street - until Sakura's hand dangles over the edge of the bed and her fingers interlace with his. They sleep like this well into the morning.

Kakashi nods off on the couch, Pakkun on his chest and Bisuke snoring at his feet, but he dreams of being watched and when he gasps for air, panicking, there's a hand in his hair and a soft voice shushing him back to sleep. *Kushina,* he mumbles, *don't go.*

*Sleep, sparkle,* the echo whispers and he does.

Love comes in many ways.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the long wait! I hoped to write a number of chapters in advance and finally work out some sort of schedule but my job is a hectic one and I should probably give up on planning anything already. Anyway, this chapter was just sitting there for so long
that I kind of decided to post it and get on with my life. Hope you enjoy!
Love ya all, Kay <3

also, this is the end of the part I of hit the ground running, all chapters from now on will be written in present tense

End Notes

This story is part of the LLF Comment Project, which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:
- Short comments
- Long comments
- Questions
- "<3" as extra kudos

This author replies to comments. If you don’t want a reply, feel free to sign your comment with “whisper”, I sure will be happy to receive it, but won’t respond!

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